A Note from the Editors

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This Special Issue of the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* came about in recognition of a growing interest in the role of philosophy in prison, including education about, with, and through philosophy (what we are calling ‘philosophical education’) in the prison environment. Our motivation was to reach beyond our own disciplines and begin a conversation – a critical conversation – not only about the practices of philosophical education in prison, but also about how philosophy, education, and prison sociology, including criminology, intersect, what these fields, traditions, and disciplines might learn from one another and how they may illuminate one another. This Special Issue has been put together as the first step in this conversation.

Of course, philosophy and prison are no strangers. Prison and prisoners play a role in philosophical imagination, not only in discussions of punishment but also more broadly in ethics, where thought experiments and examples conjure up “criminal” acts and characters for philosophical examination. The relationship is longstanding, complex and, at times, troubling. Recently, philosophy has been increasingly introduced to the space of the prison, from university modules to inquiry-based discussion groups, communities of philosophical inquiry, reading groups, and online courses. Yet, philosophical education can extend further to the education of philosophers through their experiences of, or reflections on, prisons and imprisonment. Consider some prominent examples: the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham contributed to the design and ‘reform’ of British prisons, Michel Foucault gave us a new perspective on the birth of the prison, its relation to power, and the question of the ‘intolerable’ through his work with the *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons*, and Angela Davis has argued for the abolition of prisons and was herself incarcerated. In this issue, two of our authors (Kouppanou and Earle) reflect on the life and work of Bernard Stiegler, whose work on philosophy of technology has shaped contemporary philosophical landscapes and who offered profound reflections on the world of the prison and the question of individuation in his essay ‘How I Became a Philosopher’ in *Acting Out* (2009). Finally, drawing on her research in prison, Alison Liebling in this issue offers a set of moving philosophical reflections on the writings of George Eliot. In so doing, she reveals how attenuated, sensitive, prison-based research might in turn shape moral philosophy.

Yet, it is important to remember that prisons are institutions and, moreover, communities: spaces where people must live together, often in difficult circumstances, and sometimes
for very long periods of their lives. To enter these spaces as educators, as philosophers, and as researchers, requires critically reflecting on our motivations and practices, the nature of our encounters, and developing awareness of the dynamics of these spaces. In so doing we can also come to deepen our understanding of the ways in which our reliance on different concepts in practice and research makes different characteristics of people and places visible or invisible. For these reasons, and others, bringing philosophy into the prison classroom can be fraught with moral questions, questions that can sometimes be overlooked. What topics should we cover? What might be the impact of discussing moral dilemmas in a context where people have had to grapple with intractable moral dilemmas themselves? Would discussions of freedom, justice, responsibility, and forgiveness be too close to the bone? Might more abstract topics, such as the nature of time or radical scepticism, have significance for students in prison that we cannot foresee? Why are we there? What is our motivation for going into this space in the first place? How do our motivations fit with those of the prison and those of the people who wish to attend as prison-based students?

These questions are not merely educational. They also pertain to ethical and existential issues, concerning the roles we play in prisons, our impact on the people we meet there, and the potential for philosophy to have significant and unexpected meaning in and implications for a person’s life. As such, it is important that research on philosophical education in prisons does not solely focus on non-educational success criteria, particularly those of interest to the prison estate such as prison-based outcomes of rehabilitation, desistance, reduced violence, and well-being. Studies that focus on these kinds of criteria may well offer important insight into how to deliver programmes and their potential impact. Nonetheless, they risk obscuring what is of educational and existential value in the space of a prison and could instead reflect more carefully on what kinds of criteria might more faithfully reflect what is valuable in education. Yet, so too, the prison context itself, as we saw above, can also shape philosophical thought and education. It’s important, therefore, to reflect on the aims of education in this context.

This Special Issue does not answer all the questions it raises. But we hope that it opens a fruitful conversation between philosophy, education, and criminology, as fields of research, scholarship, and practices. In the following sections, as editors, we offer our own reflections from our different disciplinary perspectives, perspectives shaped by our engagement with the authors in this Special Issue.

Education (Aislinn O’Donnell)

Learning to See: Ethics and Education

Firstly, even to have somebody learn, you first have to make a connection with that person, and you have to have a relationship. And it is personal how that works, particularly with people in jails. That if the personal connection is made, the academic part, the knowledge that is being imparted is secondary. There is a trust. You are insisting you are coming from the authority side, and it is a very polarised side, so you are coming from that system. To gain that trust and for them to open to you, in order that they will learn, then they must feel that you are on their side almost, without compromising yourself. If I were in the position of an educationalist, then I would spend a lot of time around that and continue to spend a lot of time around that. It is only at a certain point that people are open to possibilities from you, when you have gained that trust. (Interview in O’Donnell, 2012b, p. 22)

The opening quote from a former Republican (Provisional-IRA) prisoner spoke of how they (the people in prison) must feel like you (the educator) are on their side, but without compromising yourself. He was convinced that a relationship must be established before education can begin. In her article in this issue, Fairbairn explains the relationship between trust and
transformation in education, in particular the ways in which education can enable people to be seen, to see themselves, and to see the world and their place in it in a different light. This conviction framed how I approached doing philosophy in prison and attuned me to the importance of building trust. Some years later, I listened to a young man who had begun computer classes in prison. He said to me, ‘It was the first time in my life that I felt I had been seen as a singular human being.’ The language of ‘being seen’ recurred in different ways through my time teaching in prison, and it underpins how I came to think of foundational commitments in education, in particular the concepts that, as we learn to use them, shape our lives and outlooks (Laverty, 2010), in this case, seeing the other.

So, whilst Kant’s critical project of transcendental philosophy described the conditions of possibility for experience, here, following Gilles Deleuze in the vein of this tradition, I’d like to propose some of the conditions for the creation of educational experience. I begin with meditations on ethics and education and then offer a brief introduction to the relationship between education and ‘love of the world’.

These examples of the importance of trust and ‘being seen’ do not mean that such ethico-existential encounters are educational tout court, however, they intimate some of the conditions for someone to open up to, or be opened up by, education. Megan Laverty (2010) and Alison Liebling (this issue) tell us of the importance of moral insight and attention by drawing on the writings of Weil, Murdoch, and in Liebling’s case, George Eliot. Ethical life here involves particular ways of seeing, looking, and attending and, I suggest, these ways of seeing are made possible by a deepening moral, intellectual, and emotional understanding of significant concepts, like justice or ethical attention, in the life of the person, in ways that are supported by the institutions in which they live or work. From the perspective of philosophical education, this can involve, for both the students and participants, coming to develop a richer, and more intimate understanding of concepts that matter in living a life. For educators, it can invite moments of interruption and re-orientation such that these living concepts, like trust, or care, or dignity, become embodied in the presence of the educator and in the institution, slowly deepening through practice. Helpful in this regard is Jean Oury’s (2007) description of the way of thinking about ethics as an ethic of respect for the singular other.

There is something of that in the articles that follow – not losing sight of the singularity of each person, notwithstanding the other pressures that can come to bear in (educational) life. Yet, even as an ethical relationship is a kind of educative relationship, education also involves a relationship with the world, ideally fostering ‘love of the world’. This, in turn, involves supporting and creating the conditions for what Deleuze (1988) calls ‘processes of singularisation’ and, drawing on Spinoza, the ‘composition’ of subjectivities. One never knows in advance what one will come to love, which is why it is important to offer diverse and rich curricula and approaches (O’Donnell, 2012a).

When I knew I was to begin teaching philosophy in prison, I contacted two philosophers whose work had shaped some of the emerging ethical principles that would come to define my engagement with education (not only in prison) and with philosophy. The first, Susan James, helped me to come to understand Stoicism and the kinds of exercises or technologies of self that can provide a (fragile) set of rituals to sustain the self, in times of crisis, such as life in a total institution. The second, Raimond Gaita, had written a book A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice (2001). In one example that has always stayed with me, he describes a nun who came into the psychiatric institution in which he worked as a young student. As she talked to the patients, she revealed to him, and the other (benevolent) psychiatrists working there, that despite what they said about equality, they did not really believe this, because only she spoke to the patients without a trace of condescension. The way she looked at the patients revealed the full humanity of those whose affliction had made them invisible. In his example, the acts of looking and being-with were revelatory. This tells us something of the relationship between ethical life and the feeling that one has been seen, not as object but
as a singular human being, but also that one can learn to see the other in this way. This is not simply the dialectic of recognition but rather a phenomenological experience that expresses the revelatory power of a particular kind of way of looking. Developing relationships, including educational relationships, involves cultivating this way of looking so that the other feels that they are seen as a moral equal. It is also a form of understanding. Perhaps then, two concepts of love - attention as love and justice, and love of the world - can help to bring together the ethical and the educational.

Unfortunately, ‘deficit’ discourses and attitudes can seep into both criminological and educational discussions about those in our society who are in prison or who are marginalised. The appropriate response is not necessarily one that focuses on strengths, resilience, and flourishing as these too can sometimes fail to adequately face the harm that prisons do and the suffering and affliction in these sites, striving too quickly to transform vulnerability into strength or to move beyond the tragedy that is part of the human condition. Furthermore, the risk of sociological or psychological explanations of causes of crime is that they may serve to obscure who someone is beyond all those categories and classifications, treating them, as Duguid (2000) says, as object rather than subject, or as Maxine Greene (1995) says, seeing small rather than seeing big. Speaking to this sense of psychic alienation, some of the students in my philosophy class once remarked, this is like the Foucauldian double: only the pile of paper, the records about you, the interpretations of the comments that you once made ‘speaks’ and is heard, and you are muted, seated beside this ‘paper tiger’ whilst the professionals decide who you are.

The act of creative attention to the other, seeing how things are, is one of de-creation, or renunciation of the ‘fat relentless ego’ as Murdoch (1970) calls it, making space for the other to appear. The metaphor here is one of light – a particular way of looking illuminates the other. For instance, when the Samaritan stops on the road before a broken, bleeding part of flesh, that which was a ‘thing’ becomes visible as human once the act of creative attention sees that which does not exist: love sees the invisible.

It is this capacity to ‘face reality’ and ‘see the other’ that provides us with a valuable lesson about the ethics of education. An important role of the teacher involves creating the condition for educational experiences and encounters. I am suggesting here that to do so one must not only see students as singular human beings, but these students should also feel that they have been seen. Of course, this is but one element of what matters educationally. The authors in this Special Issue also invite us to turn attention to concepts like trust (Fairbairn), freedom (Higgins), collaboration (Snyder and Brown), intellectual character (Pritchard), reintegration (Grossi), moral insight (Liebling), and dialogue (Stapleton and Ward), as well as enabling us to understand intimately the relationship between prison, philosophy, and education in reflections on Bernard Stiegler (Kouppanou and Earle).

**Education: Coming to Love the World**

Education is often seen as a tool to solve the problems of the world, from Plato’s efforts in the *Republic*, to Rousseau’s reflections on political life, to more contemporary justifications in terms of social cohesion or employment. When approached with this intent, education itself is valued only instrumentally and can readily become part of wider disciplinary apparatuses, for example, when reports on engagement in education are included as part of an individual’s profile in probation or when participation in education is encouraged in incentivised regimes, whereby, as is often noted, rights too swiftly become privileges. Such initiatives are perhaps understandable from the perspectives of security or even socialisation and qualification, but do not illuminate the value of education for the individual, and the beautiful risk that encountering education involves – one never knows how one will be changed (O’Donnell, 2018, 2012a, 2013). This is not to suggest that education is not of instrumental value, but rather that it ought not be reduced to this, and that the purposes and aims of education ought to maintain a sense of
its intrinsic, ethical, and existential value.

Brian Collins (2014) offers a philosophical analysis of the ways in which non-educational aims can lead to the co-optation of education to other ends in prison. In describing the importance of the autonomy of education in prison, he argued that education must remain a space of freedom and of *parrhesia* or fearless speech for students in prison, uncoupled from rehabilitation. In this issue, Higgins argues that rehabilitation can fail to acknowledge the pains of imprisonment, the criminogenic nature of prisons, and that too much weight is placed on recidivism as a measure of success. She argues that the concept of rehabilitation may itself need to be ‘rehabilitated’, so to speak, in order to invite a more holistic approach whereby rehabilitation and education are approached “as processes that have the potential to enable the person in prison to realise their potential, interrogate their place in the world and experience freedom”. One way to reflect on this is offered by Masschelein and Simons (2013) who describe the school or *scholé* as a source of free time where immediate and utilitarian concerns can be temporarily suspended in order to take up a different relation to ‘study’. This ‘free time’, they claim, “transforms knowledge and skills into ‘common goods’, and therefore has the potential to give everyone, regardless of background, natural talent or aptitude, the time and space to leave their known environment, rise above themselves and renew (and thus change in unpredictable ways) the world” (Masschelein and Simons, 2013, p. 10). This does not ignore key sociological and identity issues such as race, class, and gender, but by inviting a different kind of approach that does not begin with an identity position and starts instead with what Jacques Rancière (1991) calls an “opinion about equality”, it can serve to interrupt the linear dynamics which justify education as a tool used ‘in order to’ achieve something else, such as the rehabilitated prisoner. For an example of the beautiful risk of education, a transformative encounter with making art is described in one interview. This quote invites us to reflect on the ethico-existential dimensions of educational experience, the implications of the ‘suspension of world’, and the importance of ‘encountering the world’ as constitutive of the educational endeavour, including in prison.

Previous to all of this I had read – there was a great Russian Prince Kropotkin who was a Russian anarchist and he served time in prison. He said the colour of prison is grey but our memories and our imaginations and our creative thoughts are multicoloured. Well, if the prisoner is in jail long enough the memories fade, and basically the colours in our imaginings fade in keeping with the prison. Basically, if it ever comes to the point at which the prisoner’s thoughts become as grey as the prison, then he is lost. I remembered this. And when [the artist/teacher] came with the possibility of making colours and shapes and seeking harmony in a place which was totally unnatural and totally disharmonious. This was an opportunity in a sense to take me out of where I was, and I could escape into trying to create pieces. And that was what it gave. For me that was the principal thing. I wasn’t going to allow myself to become as grey as the place I was in. (Interview in O’Donnell, 2012b, pp. 28-29)

In a prison it is as though the world is inverted. Rather than assuming all is permitted unless there is a reason or a law to prohibit it, in the space of the prison one must assume that everything is prohibited unless explicitly sanctioned. Sensual and sensory experience becomes drained of colour and texture, but an educator can also invite attention to the tiniest moments or gestures, the least of things, as Oury says. Teaching is also a practice of ‘acts of ostension’ – look at this! The moss growing between concrete flags, or even, as one man said, the toilet roll in a painting class…

Both Kouppanou and Earle (this issue) share with us their reflections on the philosophical thought and life of Bernard Stiegler. When Stiegler (2009) recounted his time in Saint Michel prison for an armed robbery, he described how that time brought him to his vocation as a philosopher. “Studying the senses, Aristotle underlines in effect that one does not see that, in the case of touching, it is the body that forms the milieu, whereas in the case of sight, the milieu
is what he calls the diaphane. And he specifies that this milieu because it is that which is most close, is that which is structurally forgotten, just as water is for a fish” (pp. 13-14). The deprivation of an ‘exterior milieu’ – the world – brought to his ‘interior milieu’ “an incommensurable depth and weight” (p. 17). No longer living ‘in the world’ but in the absence of world, yet one can still weave a world from its remains, like memories, artworks, or texts.

For Stiegler, there is no interior without an exterior – we cannot have an interior life without an exterior milieu – so the problem, one so challenging in prison, becomes one of somehow weaving or creating this milieu. To avoid falling into decay, and to save himself from tumbling into madness, Stiegler described developing a meleté or technics of the self – rules, maxims, and practices. Through these practices some sense of and feeling for the world could be re-figured, and with this so too can one’s interior milieu, one’s inner world. In Stiegler’s case, through his solitude he developed this ability to ‘become-other’ that he equates to individuation. Jean Oury (2007) says that first and foremost we need to take care of our institutions so that they become spaces for encounters and heterogeneity rather than preserving an atmosphere of sameness and deadening homogeneity so that these practices can open up other possibilities of existence precipitated by curiosity and interest, and in so doing this support “the struggle for social justice”, which as Gaita says, “is the struggle to make our institutions reveal rather than obscure, and then enhance rather than diminish, the full humanity of our fellow citizens” (2001, np).

**Prison Sociology (Kirstine Szifris)**

With philosophy you can bring out your own ideas and then, through the group you can rework it, remodel it, change it, look at it, to get to somewhere. So it’s your part in building that and, I suppose, it’s more empowering in that sense because you are doing it yourself. (Philosophy participant, Grendon, quoted in Szifris, 2021)

Constituting a ‘radical shattering’ of continuity and routine (Liebling, 1992), in entering prison, prisoners are isolated from friends and family, excluded from participating in society, and have the unenviable task of establishing themselves within the prison community. The stigma that comes with entering prison and becoming a ‘prisoner’ brings with it a sense of being labelled or condemned (Crawley & Sparks, 2005). Coined by Sykes (1958), the term ‘pains and deprivations of long-term imprisonment’ highlights the deteriorative impact of incarceration. Boredom, isolation, lack of activity, victimisation, breakdown in relationships, and poor living conditions all contribute to the difficulties of maintaining psychological wellbeing whilst in prison (Liebling, 1992). In such an environment, a space for philosophising and for philosophical dialogue with others, takes on a particular meaning.

Prison sociology focuses on prisons as a place in which people live, socialise, develop, and change over time (see Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1972; Toch, 1977). Early studies of prisoners and prisons highlighted the role of relationships in shaping prisoner experience, with emotional distance and social isolation characterising much of people’s time spent in prisons. These studies suggested that isolation within the prisoner community results from the small pool of people from which the individual can choose their friends (Cohen & Taylor, 1972). More recently, Crewe’s study (2009) demonstrated that social relations are often a defence against loneliness and for personal safety, with prisoners reporting that they only made one or two ‘proper friends’ during their time in prison. However, my own research indicates that social isolation might also stem from the types of interactions that occur in the prison environment.

My work involved conducting an ethnographically led study into philosophy education in prisons (see Szifris, 2017 and 2021). I took on the dual-role of teacher-researcher and drew heavily on prison sociology in an attempt to understand the environment in which I was working. At the heart lies an interest in the interaction between the individual and the context in which they find themselves. Taking philosophical education into the prison classroom
emphasises this interaction – the prison environment and the participants’ status of ‘prisoner’ shaped the nature and content of philosophical discussion. In the philosophy classroom, people in prison have space to engage in topics of conversation that go far beyond the prison walls.

My research findings demonstrated that, through philosophy, it is possible to ‘grow’ trust, develop relationships, and give space for personal exploration. Even in the context of a complex and charged prison atmosphere, philosophy provided a space for a community to develop. These findings highlight the importance of recognising the interaction of person and context – the environment shapes the individual’s experience, and the individual’s ability to express the self shapes their experience of the environment. When the environment is a prison, the need to recognise the relevance of context becomes more apparent.

In this Special Issue, several of the authors offer further insights into the role of education in the prison environment. For example, Grossi discusses the APAC model in Brazil – a model based on a particular perspective on human nature that emphasises issues of reintegration. Education is discussed for those incarcerated but also with reference to the need to educate society towards understanding and welcoming those who have spent time in prison back into society upon release. Higgins also discusses the role of education in prison by articulating education as a right that should not be withdrawn from the individual when they enter prison, whilst Snyder and Brown consider collaborative education in prison as part of the continuum of education from school, to college, to university. With these different views on the role of education in the prison environment, these articles, along with others in this issue, offer insights into how our perspectives, the environment, and education relates to the individual and their experiences. What’s more, we have aimed for a critical conversation, where we reflect on the prison environment, the prison, and the individual to understand more fully the role of education.

Prisons and prison experiences vary. However, the overwhelming feeling among prisoners is that of boredom and stagnation. Cohen and Taylor’s (1972) use of the term ‘psychological survival’ encapsulates the pains of imprisonment in that prison involves a mental struggle. Prison life is monotonous. Prisons are often grey, dull places with little daylight and characterised by bars, locks, and doors. Although staff often attempt to alleviate this by putting up paintings by prisoners, placing plants in corridors, and adding colour to the walls, the lack of variety in a prison is palpable.

Prison exerts control over every aspect of a prisoner’s life, resulting in a loss of autonomy and agency. Confined to as well as within the prison (Sykes, 1958) prisoners are moved around, from location to location, from cell to work, to gym, to education (Sparks et al., 1996). Reduced to a dependent state (Sykes, 1958), prisoners wait to be provided with meals, wait to be taken to work or visits. Toch (1977) argues that this loss of autonomy amounts to an attack on the individual’s personal integrity, whilst Liebling (1992) claims it leaves prisoners at risk of ‘losing themselves’ to the routine of the regime. A range of research demonstrates that prison can induce an existential crisis – the individual is removed suddenly from their normal, everyday lives, and thrown, often unprepared, into the life of the prison (Liebling, 2012). In my research, prisoners often discussed the difficulties of this loss of autonomy. Their studies would be interrupted by difficulties getting materials, their interests curtailed due to the lack of opportunities in prison, and their skills would often go unused. One of my participants said he would be happy if he could “just do a bit of gardening”, with another saying he spent his days playing computer games to numb himself to the pain of being inside and stop himself from worrying about losing his relationship with family (Szifris, 2021).

The prison environment thus offers a unique space to consider philosophical questions of identity: how does the prison environment affect a person’s sense of self? What do people in prison do to adapt to and navigate the prisoner community? What strategies are employed to ‘psychologically survive’ the experience? Answers to these questions are inevitably underpinned by further, philosophical questions about the nature of the self, its persistence, and its
relation to others. Concepts such as trust, wellbeing, relationships, power, and transformation also take on particular meaning in the prison environment. Philosophy provides a means to understand what these concepts mean for the individual in the prison environment. Through engaging in philosophical conversation, the prison sociologist can gain an insight into the prisoner experience and the prison society. However, perhaps most importantly, space for open, genuine, philosophical conversation in the prison environment is most relevant to the prisoner-participant. For them, it is about freedom of expression, freedom to disagree, and freedom to explore different ideas in the company of others. In a deeply dehumanizing environment, education – and, in particular, philosophical education – can provide space for people in prison to take on identities beyond those assigned to them by the penal landscape. In the philosophy classroom they are not ‘prisoners’ or ‘offenders’, but instead ‘people’, ‘philosophers’, and ‘learners’.

**Philosophy (Mike Coxhead)**

One aim of this editorial is to reflect on our individual disciplinary perspectives and motivations for this Special Issue. I am a UK-trained academic philosopher and a practitioner of public philosophy, insofar as I have been delivering programmes of philosophical education in UK prisons since 2016. I shall here speak from both perspectives. In the spirit of this Special Issue, I hope to offer some critical reflections on the interaction of philosophy with prisons, prisoners, and prison research.

First, some context. In 2015, midway through my PhD, I found myself disenchanted and unmotivated by academic philosophy. My research on Aristotle’s epistemology felt stale, excessively niche, and without worth. I took an interruption of studies and reflected on what to do. During this time, I met with my mentor and once supervisor, MM McCabe, who had recently learned about college-prison partnerships in the US, such as Princeton’s Prison Teaching Initiative. She suggested I extend my interruption and think about teaching philosophy in prisons, in part as a way to explore the value of philosophy outside the academy. I swiftly requested a 12-month period of leave and, with the support of my then Head of Department, Bill Brewer, started contacting prison governors with the offer of an introductory philosophy course. By summer 2016, with colleagues Andy West and Andrea Fassolas, we had piloted our first course at HMP Belmarsh. In the years to come, we continued to deliver at Belmarsh, as well as other London prisons, including Downview and Wandsworth. The courses we deliver are discussion-based – ‘dialogic’ in the terms of Stapleton and Ward in this issue – in order to be relatively accessible to students independent of formal educational background and English literacy. The project is ongoing, once funded predominantly by King’s College London and now supported by the charity, Philosophy in Prison.

My initial motivations for taking philosophy into prisons were at the same time personal and theoretical. I wanted to know whether philosophy had value beyond the confines of specialists and university students – and, moreover, whether my doing philosophy could have such value. Prison seemed to me a potentially rich environment to explore this issue. Though, I should be clear, the prospect of teaching in prison was also alluring for other reasons. It appealed, for example, to my curiosity: for me, as many others, prisons play a significant role in our cultural imagination but remain relatively opaque institutions. It also appealed to my desire to do something worthwhile. Surely, I thought, it would be a straightforwardly good thing to offer philosophy classes in prisons, particularly given the need for UK prisons to offer educational programmes better suited to the diverse needs of the prison population (Coates, 2016, pp. 27-37).

The pilot course at Belmarsh was a rich and stimulating experience. One particularly striking outcome was the diverse range of values that our students associated with the course. Students remarked, for example, on the pleasure and enjoyment they took in the classes; the intellectual and emotional stimulation of philosophical discussion; a sense of community and
an enriched social life, through new relationships, topics of conversation, and a fresh way of socialising back on the wing (philosophical discussion is, after all, a social activity); access to an otherwise inaccessible and, in one student's words, “high-brow” academic subject; re-engagement with education and reading; intellectual empowerment, particularly as the result of being heard and taken seriously by others; and intellectual changes, such as becoming more open-minded, an ability and willingness to engage in open-ended inquiry, a better understanding of others, and a better understanding of oneself and one’s own actions. As we continued to deliver courses, many of these values recurred in student feedback and others arose, particularly as we taught in new contexts such as a women’s prison and with vulnerable prisoners. 

In short, I had found what I was looking for: it was clear that philosophy had worth beyond the academy, perhaps even significant worth. But at the same time important questions remained unanswered: were these values unique to philosophy? Surely other educational programmes could increase access to education, intellectually empower students, and so on. If so, what, if anything, is unique about philosophical education? If philosophy is intellectually empowering, would this persist beyond the classroom and carry through to new contexts? Can philosophy really help us understand other people better (rather than, say, ideas, arguments, and systems of thought)? What about understanding our own actions – how might philosophy be relevant to that? What is valuable about open-mindedness and open-ended inquiry? Do these have any special significance in the prison environment? And in what way, if at all, is philosophical discussion shaped, informed, and perhaps even constrained by being conducted in a prison?

One initial motivation for this Special Issue, then, was to delve deeper into the nature and value of philosophy and, in particular, philosophical education in the prison context. Consider, for example, Pritchard’s paper in this issue, which focuses on a philosophy-based prison education programme developed by staff from the University of Edinburgh, New College Lanarkshire, and the Scottish Prison Service. Pritchard analyses student interviews through the lens of a particular philosophical thesis, i.e. that the development of intellectual character virtue is the proper epistemic goal of education, where intellectual character virtues include open-mindedness, curiosity, integrity, intellectual humility, etc. Pritchard thus argues for a sensibility approach to teaching philosophy in prison, which focuses on “cultivating a kind of critical sensibility that is characteristic of a philosophical engagement with a topic”. This is contrasted with approaches that focus primarily on teaching the subject matter of philosophy. According to Pritchard, sensibility-focused approaches are best suited for the cultivation of intellectual character virtue and thus the proper epistemic goal of education. He also explores the ways in which the development of intellectual virtue might have value in the prison context, for example intellectual virtues can have instrumental, practical value for prisoners in interactions with prison staff, but also have non-instrumental worth as an integral part of a flourishing, human life more generally.

Stapleton and Ward’s co-authored paper also mounts a case for how we should think about the value of philosophical education in prison. They distinguish between two ways of thinking about the value of philosophy outside of the university context. According to the transactional model, educational goods such as knowledge and cognitive skills are transmitted from teacher to students. On the dialogic model, the teacher is a facilitator, rather than a transmitter of goods, whose primary aim is to be an active and sincere participant in philosophical discussion. Although the teacher-facilitator will help to structure discussion, classes are open-ended insofar as there is no fixed end-point or outcome. Stapleton and Ward argue that the nature and value of the dialogic model cannot be reduced to the transactional. Moreover, the dialogic model better captures a dominant strand of philosophical education in UK prison, has instrumental advantages such as being more accessible to prison learners with diverse for-

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1 For the first-hand perspective of one of our students at HMP Downview, see How philosophy helped a woman in prison, 2020.
mal educational backgrounds, and is well adapted to facilitate transformations in the form of “perspective-unsticking”, for students and facilitator alike.

Both papers exemplify how the practice of philosophical education in prison, as well as prison education more generally, can benefit from philosophical research and interrogation. But a further prospect for the interaction of philosophy with prisons is that philosophy itself will be enriched. As Stapleton and Ward note, taking well-worn philosophical questions into prisons can throw up novel ideas and perspectives, e.g. that an artistic forgery might be of greater value than the original on account of the expertise and creativity of the forger. Similarly, Jennifer Lackey, director of the Northwestern Prison Education Programme, has written about how her philosophical views on the ethics and epistemology of credibility changed as the result of teaching courses in a maximum-security men’s prison in Chicago (Lackey, 2016, cf. Lackey, 2020). By taking their interactions and experiences with prisoners and the prison context seriously, these philosophers have found themselves prompted to reconsider and develop their own philosophical views.

My own experiences reflect this. Philosophical treatments of open-mindedness – an archetypal intellectual virtue – have explored various ways in which open-mindedness is valuable. Some, for example, have argued that open-mindedness has instrumental value from an epistemic point of view, insofar as being open-minded promotes epistemic goods for the open-minded agent, such as true belief, knowledge, or understanding (e.g. Carter & Gordon, 2014; Fantl, 2018; Kwong, 2017; Riggs, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Zagzebski, 1996, cf. Battaly, 2018). Others have argued that open-mindedness has value independent of whether it yields such epistemic goods, simply in virtue of the fact that an open-minded agent has good epistemic character (e.g. Baehr 2011; Montmarquet 1993).2 But reflections offered by prison-learners on courses I have delivered suggest that these accounts of the value of open-mindedness may not be exhaustive.

Rather than focusing on the value of being open-minded for the open-minded agent – e.g. in terms of the epistemic goods that being open-minded might yield, or the value of being an intellectually virtuous person – students commented instead on the value of being treated with an open-mind by another. Students remarked, for example, that they felt intellectually empowered because others treated them and their ideas with an open-mind during class. This, it seems to me, offers a novel way to think about the value of open-mindedness. Suppose that being open-minded towards another person requires taking them seriously, as worthy of intellectual engagement. This act of taking another person seriously might confer a sense of intellectual worth upon the person being treated with an open-mind and, in turn, empower them intellectually (to see this, think of the negative, disempowering effect of being treated with a closed-mind – the thought is that being treated with an open-mind can have the opposite, enabling effect). Open-mindedness might then have value insofar as acts of open-mindedness can function to empower people as epistemic agents – as thinkers, learners, knowers, etc.

This line of thought is overly compressed, requiring significant elaboration and argument. It would also benefit from engagement with systematic research on the value of traits such as open-mindedness in the prison context (e.g. LoCI and Wittenberg University Writing Group, 2016; Szifris, 2021, pp. 85-98). But it is nonetheless instructive of the ways in which doing philosophy in prison might offer novel insight into substantive, philosophical debates. This is not to claim, of course, that doing philosophy in other contexts beyond the usual confines of academic research and university teaching would not yield novel insights. The point, rather, is that in whatever ways and to whatever extent the context of prisons and the experience of being imprisoned can be unique, the interaction of philosophy with prisoners, prisoners, and prison research is likely to shed new light on certain philosophical questions. What’s more, this interaction will be all the richer the more integrated it is, e.g. with more prisoners and

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2 Arguments have also been offered for the moral value of open-mindedness, e.g. Arpaly 2011; Cremaldi and Kwong, 2017; Song, 2018.
ex-prisoners authoring philosophical research, or collaborative projects between prisoners and non-imprisoned university staff and students. Indeed, the worth of collaborative programmes is brought out particularly well by Snyder and Brown in this issue, who argue that collaborative, project-based education programmes between imprisoned and non-imprisoned students can produce particularly rich and rewarding results, for both parties.

For all its potential value, however, philosophical education in prison is not without its challenges and scope for problems. Perhaps obviously, though not often reported, is the fact that not all students find value in doing philosophy, with some even finding it discomforting. Some of my students, for example, experienced the open-ended nature of philosophical debate as frustrating, disorientating, and even distressing, for example when definite answers are so infrequently, if ever, arrived at.

There are also ways in which philosophy might be shaped and even constrained by the prison context. Although it is often the case that practitioners of philosophical education in prison are formally external to the prison – they might be entering the prison environment as representatives of a university or a charity, rather than as prison staff – their presence is nonetheless sanctioned by the prison, and they must operate within the constraints of its structures and aims. For my colleagues and I, our relation to the prison is often visually represented, for example in the form of temporary, staff, security badges and drawn keys. As such, some students quite reasonably wondered if we were reporting back on what was said in class. If we tackled moral questions, for example, were we taking note of the views expressed? Others wondered if we were there to deliver a course specifically for prisoners, insofar as we might have selected topics that we considered to be of particular relevance to prisoners, such as issues of justice, normative ethics, or freedom. Or perhaps we were there to help our students improve themselves in ways relevant to the prison’s aims of rehabilitation, desistance, reduced violence, security, etc. Each of these worries have the power to shape a conversation, for example through self-censorship, and thus the potential to derail philosophical thought which, we often think, should strive to follow an argument wherever it may lead.

The prison context might also shape the import and perceived value of philosophical education for students in prison. As noted, students often report intellectual changes, for example in the form of increased open-mindedness. In my courses at Belmarsh, some students explicitly framed these changes in terms of the development of “thinking skills”, occasionally with reference to their actions. Some claimed, for example, that the philosophy course had helped them acquire thinking skills that would help them think more carefully about the potential consequences of their actions, or to understand another person’s perspective before acting. This was not language that I had used to frame the value of philosophy and it initially appeared to me benign coincidence – our students had experienced, as many who study philosophy do, that philosophising can help develop cognitive skills and intellectual traits, in some form or other. But the language of thinking skills is also reminiscent of Ministry of Justice Offender Behaviour Programmes, such as the Thinking Skills Programme then running at Belmarsh. A central premise of such programmes is that “cognitive skills deficits, such as poor reasoning and problem solving, are important factors in explaining offending behaviour and that these skills can be taught” (Clarke et al., 2004, p. 2). The relevant cognitive skills addressed include critical reasoning, flexible thinking, understanding the perspectives of others and society, moral and value-based reasoning, and interpersonal problem solving – outcomes often associated with philosophical education. What’s more, it has been claimed that similar cognitive skills programmes, such as Enhanced Thinking Skills, have a positive impact on recidivism (Sadlier, 2010; Travers et al., 2015).

As my co-editor, Aislinn O’Donnell, discusses above, discourses of deficit can be harmful, and we should be wary of co-opting education for agendas such as desistance and rehabilitation. Whatever relevance education might have for these aims of the prison, the broader and arguably more significant values of education stand to be diminished if it is instrumentalised...
in this way. Perhaps, then, practitioners should resist framing the value of their courses to prisoners and prisons in terms of the development of thinking skills, cognitive skills, etc. What’s significant about my example, however, is that the evaluation of philosophy in terms of thinking skills was not imposed by myself nor, as far as I’m aware, directly by prison staff. Instead, it was brought by our students. As such, it is an example of how prison discourses and agendas can indirectly come to shape the perceived value of philosophical education.

How should we respond to this? What seems to me genuinely significant about the current trend of philosophical education in prison is that it is primarily discursive, aiming at open-ended, critical discussion, where those delivering courses act as sincere participants in group inquiry. One significant advantage of this model is that any topic or question can in principle be tackled. I have seen, for example, students use our philosophy classes to address and explore challenging issues beyond the syllabus, such as issues of racism within and external to the group. Similarly, then, thorny questions about the value of philosophy in relation to prison aims such as desistance and rehabilitation, as well as the impact and potential constraints of the broader prison context on philosophical conversation, can also in principle be explored critically by practitioners and students together. It’s on this basis, I submit, that we should continue to think about the nature and value of philosophical education in prisons.

**Conclusion**

As previously noted, philosophy and prison have a longstanding history but, as this Special Issue hopes to make clear, there is still much to gain through philosophy’s engagement with prisons and prisoners, and vice versa. What’s more, we hope to show that an interdisciplinary approach – with conversations taking place between philosophy, education, prison sociology, and criminology – is well placed to shed novel and unexpected light on the value and complexities of this engagement. The nature of interdisciplinary work is inherently complicated, particularly when fields of study have significantly different traditions, methodologies, and aims. We take it for granted that this is a conversation that will have to walk before it can run and, as such, this Special Issue should be viewed as a starting point for future discussions, rather than the final word. We intend that our practices and understanding of philosophical education in prison will not only continue but flourish as a result.
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A Note About the Cover Art

No Show
Artist: Group work installation, from a workshop with sculptor Cathy Carmen, at Castlerea Prison
Photo by: Eugene Langan, 2019.

The installation titled No Show, was created by a group of participants during workshops facilitated by sculptor Cathy Carmen, at Castlerea Prison in 2019. The work reflects the infrastructure established in recent decades to promote art education in prisons in Ireland, appreciated now in the rear view mirror of pandemic restrictions. Cathy built up a relationship with the education centre at the prison, staffed by specialist teachers employed by the local Education and Training Board. Her workshops were funded by the Artists in Prisons Scheme, an arts participation programme, funded jointly by the Arts Council of Ireland and the Irish Prison Service. Carmen promotes a workshop method of hands on learning, and she guided the participants, who had chosen to attend, in a creative process of group activities and discussions, that produced the No Show installation and a number of other related pieces. She choose body casting, with the aim of expressing something personal, as a starting point calculated to promote engagement, while preconceived ideas about finished pieces were avoided at that early stage. In response, one man posed for a plaster cast with his arms folded to express defensiveness and tension, in terms of body language. Carmen talks about “playing” with a material as a means of getting in touch with feelings, allowing things to happen, while searching for a way to express meaning in a more developed and finished piece that is truthful to the individual or group. That unpredictable leap of imagination happened, during a group discussion, with the plaster cast of the folded arms propped on a table against the wall. There was consensus that the plaster cast belonged on the edge of a table, and the final shape and meaning of the sculpture emerged when a man suggested that the folded arms evoked the desolation felt, when a partner failed to show up for a visit. The absence of the “no show” visitor was quickly evoked by adding an empty chair, and the disparate elements were brought together when covered in plaster bandage. Finally a poem, titled “For You to be here,” hand written on scorched paper that appeared to have survived a fire, and written by the man who had modelled for the plaster cast, was placed on the table.

Later that year, the installation was included by Irish artist and curator Brian Maguire in Open Minds, a national exhibition of creative work by people in custody. Maguire insisted that a selection of work was photographed professionally to illustrate the catalogue, and the exhibition was seen at Rua Red, the South Dublin Arts Centre, in September, and at the Hunt Museum in Limerick, during October and November 2019. Education programmes at both venues facilitated engagement, by school and community groups of all ages, in active learning discussion groups and practical workshops. Both galleries reported positive feedback and above average attendance, and at Rua Red, a group on day release from an open prison discussed their work in the exhibition with students from the National College of Art and Design.

The group who created the No Show installation, embraced an encounter with an artist, and their work generated a genuine impression of “giving something back to society” when exhibited in the community. Rather than playing a role as passive recipients of education, instead as active learners, they made a unique contribution within a national framework of education and culture that does not recognize prison walls as boundaries. Three months later, prison education and regional arts centres were closed by the pandemic. The challenge now is to rebuild that learning infrastructure, from the poster on a prison notice board offering places in a workshop, to the community group engaged in an intense discussion of all the issues raised, during a visit to an exhibition of creative work by people in custody, at their local arts centre.

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What is Philosophy in Prison? George Eliot and the Search for Moral Insight

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Abstract: I argue in this article that people in prison make excellent philosophers, for reasons related to what they are deprived of. I also suggest that great novels constitute, or at the very least, introduce us to, philosophy. Some of the deepest questions about human life can be addressed by fusing philosophical thinking with empirical research in prisons. Prisoners talk with depth and insight about what it is to feel human, what matters most in human experience, and the importance of the ‘vibrations of fellow feeling’.

Keywords: prison, humanity, research, philosophy, authentic description

Introduction

The core ethical question becomes how human relations can expand and empower individuals’ capacities, instead of diminishing them (Carlisle, 2019, pp. 45-46, on Spinoza).

As George Eliot, she would see her work as a novelist as “unravelling” … the “mystery” of moral life (Carlisle, 2019, p. 33).

How do we find our bearings in this complex and turbulent life? What kinds of encounters and relationships expand or diminish our capacities? What if answers to these questions can be found by fusing philosophical thinking with empirical research? Abstract ideas must apply to real, complex lives if they are to have meaning and value. Philosophical novelists labour in this territory, putting ideas to work in their depictions of common human struggles. Their ideas derive from many sources, so they are digested and developed, rather than translated, with empathy and imagination (see Gatens, 2019). I witnessed the relevance of philosophical ideas in the real world in my work, doing applied research, in prisons. Something about investigating prison suicide and suicide attempts made concepts of meaning and survivability critical. I found, in brief, that suicides are more likely in dehumanising prisons (Liebling, 2006). The very word dehumanising denotes a denial of our human-ness, raising key questions about what that human-ness is. Prisoners talk with depth and insight about what it is to feel human, as I illustrate below. I argue in this article that people in prison make excellent philosophers, for reasons related to what they are deprived of. I also suggest that great novels constitute, or at the very least, introduce us to, philosophy. Inevitably, then, I suggest that teaching philosophy in prison is a deeply valuable and meaningful exercise. Others are beginning to make this case in interesting and convincing ways (Szifris, 2021; West, 2022).
My interest in philosophy developed out of a love of literature, although I barely noticed the philosophers’ voices in the novels of Eliot, Camus, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy when I first read them. I appreciated the fact that these novelists were great moral thinkers, but that recognition was latent and subdued. My response to their writing was emotional: I fell in love. This made me love life which – as a troubled teenager – was significant. If ‘philosophy arises naturally out of the human condition’ (Nagel, 1989), then literature provided deep and compelling accounts of that human condition in all its tragedy and complexity. Later, I found political philosophy by far the most intellectually exciting part of my politics degree. Moral philosophy eventually became an important companion in my search, with others, to conceptualise and measure the quality of prison life. We were trying to do justice to concepts that matter, and to understand, as precisely as we could, how these concepts-in-action were relevant to human experience. Philosophy is, after all, ‘a subject that gets right to the heart of what matters’ (Warburton, 2021). I noticed early on that prisoners got to the heart of the matter rather easily (Liebling, with Arnold, 2004).

Philosophical ideas helped make sense of what the data kept showing over a professional lifetime of prisons research: that what helps us to survive and flourish are ‘the virtues’: kindness, relationships with others, respect and recognition, trust, and a legitimate form of order. This is demonstrated starkly in prison, for reasons I outline below, but it is (I, and others claim) true in general. George Eliot was my favourite author, and now (in a project that is ongoing) I have the luxury of working out how uncannily her ideas and my prisons research data coincide. As Philip Davis (2017a), her intellectual biographer, said:

‘If you want to read literature that sets out to create a holding ground for raw human material—for human struggles, difficulties, and celebrations—read George Eliot’.

The key novels for me were *Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*, of which Philip Davis says:

You’ve got the most powerful working model in fiction of what human life is like. It’s as if somehow George Eliot has found the building blocks—the DNA—of existence (2017a).

In George Eliot’s case, each novel constitutes a demonstration of her synthetic philosophical thinking: that human relationships have causal effects, that our minds have a huge capacity to be affected by relations with others; and that they are almost ‘sacred’ in their significance: what Clare Carlisle calls ‘a philosophy of encounter and transformation’ (2019, p. 601). This ‘truth’ has emerged in every research project I have carried out, as long as I stayed as close as possible to feeling and experience: I learned that human vibrations really matter in prison. This insight lies at the heart of George Eliot’s humanistic philosophy.

George Eliot’s thinking had been shaped by her translations, and therefore close readings of, the works of Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza, as well as other great thinkers of her time. Through her translations of their ideas, and their carefully constructed presentations in literature (‘experiments in life’), she made them relevant. These philosophers of human experience help explain what makes most prison environments barely survivable, but also what makes a few, manageable. We need respect, recognition, kindness, order and justice like we need oxygen (but we need to be precise about the meaning-in-practice of these words). Returning to George Eliot, and the writers who influenced her, is helping me to organise ongoing empirical work ‘in the service of human life’ (Davis, 2017b). The ideas were there all along, but carefully collected empirical data supports them. I illustrate this with some examples below.

There are four dimensions to this relationship between George Eliot’s work and findings from prisons research that I want to touch on in this article:

1. George Eliot’s language, and understanding, of ‘the vibrations of fellow feeling’;
2. Her linking of the abstract with the concrete; of truth residing in individual lives;
3. Her concept of the fundamental, and the links between the grasping of this moral impulse, or the existential force of morality, and the experience of loss; and

I will address each of these briefly.

1. The Vibrations of Fellow Feeling

In an early study of the work of prison officers and their relationships with prisoners a colleague and I described a typical disciplinary hearing (known as an adjudication), in a well-functioning prison. We said:

During adjudications we sometimes witnessed a kind of ‘togetherness’ as staff and prisoners responded – knowing the full implications – to a verdict or award of the adjudicating governor. (Liebling & Price, 1999, p. 16)

This was a ‘meeting’ – a scene in the intimate dynamics of power and exchange that take place routinely, though very differently, in prison. When they work well, officers recognise prisoners, feel their moods, and understand the impact of decisions on them. Good prison officers adjust their behaviour accordingly, using discretion, and mercy, judiciously. What George Eliot calls the ‘vibrations of fellow feeling’, which are inseparable from uses of power in prison, keep people alive. She says …’It is like a diffusion or expansion of one’s own life, to be assured that its vibrations are repeated in another … ’ (Haight, 1954, in Davis, 2017a, p. 55). Human vibrations are a kind of ‘responsive action’, the presence of a soul, reverberating in sympathy to another soul. When a prison officer says, ‘put the knife down mate; just put it down’, the officer is drawing on knowledge acquired over time; seeds sown in social exchanges on and off the wing, the translation across differences into meaningful communication, acknowledgement or connection. He is present (it was a ‘he’ in this case). When this works, the miracle of order – a normative order – can be created on a wing (Liebling et al., 2010). When it fails, as it so often does, a spiral of antagonism, instability and despair follows. The contrast between ‘meetings’ and ‘un-meetings’ (see Buber’s I-It, I-Thou distinction, 2010), or presence and absence as colleagues and I have described it, makes up much of the ‘syntax of power’ in prison (see Crewe et al., 2014). The difference makes a prison ‘survivable’ or not survivable. This is a kind of moral grammar of our existence. As Buber put it, ‘All actual life is encounter’ (see Kramer, 2003, p. 21). What is illustrated in George Eliot’s fiction, grounded in the abstract philosophy of her favourite thinkers, is acutely evident in prison. People only want to go on living when those around them treat them carefully (see, e.g. Liebling, 1992, 1999b). This is why power only works effectively, or legitimately, through relationships (see Liebling, 2000, 2011). Without regard we resist and rebel, or we perish.

2. The Abstract and the Concrete

My next point flows from the first and is about Eliot’s linking of the abstract with the concrete; of truth residing in individual lives. Below are two quotations from prisoners describing their experience to illustrate this. The first is talking about his experience of disrespect, when he arrived in prison. He says:

When I first came in, I had no pillow. I approached two officers – they were chatting, so I waited. Eventually, one of them asked me what I wanted. He said, ‘You’re not entitled to a pillow’ and carried on chatting. They were not concerned about me. That seems minor, but it’s crucial. It can turn you into a different person. (Prisoner, in Liebling, with Arnold, 2004)

This second describes its opposite: respect.

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1 This is also translated as ‘All real living is meeting’. The essence of this idea is that so much of what goes on in human life occurs in the sphere of ‘between’ (see Buber, 1938). Buber was, like Eliot, inspired by Feuerbach.
Respect, right? It’s something about what I was saying with that cup of tea. An officer got me a cup of water at lock up so I could make myself one. Someone wanted to recognise that I’m a person. Do you know what I mean? (Prisoner)

The second participant identifies, phenomenologically, the content and importance of recognition to his well-being. Both get to the heart of the link between interpersonal treatment and the ‘expanding or contracting of a life’ (Davis, 2017b, p. 116) which takes place according to the ethical space around it. What is important here (and has emerged over and again in my work) is that prisons differ morally, so we can explore these differences systematically. The life force is made visible – we can see it striving, failing, being supported or devastated in a measurable environment. Prisons provide us with ‘felt ethics over theoretic politics’ (Davis, p. 101) and with a direct route to moral concepts (like justice, dignity and recognition) in action. Apparently abstract norms can be recognized ‘acting’ in ordinary persons. Human beings ‘shrink’ and ‘contract’ ‘like a nervous organism diminishing its life’ when they are treated with indifference, carelessness or brutality (Davis, 2017b, pp. 202–204; and see Porporino, 2010). They survive, or grow and flourish, when they are treated decently.

Looking at the results from our ‘moral climate surveys’ (see further Liebling, 2012; Liebling et al., 2011) – which we developed using a methodology I refer to as ‘ethnography-led measurement’ – we find that indifferent, aggressive or unfair treatment can lead to higher levels of ‘political charge’ – anger and alienation as well as suicide and violence. Radicalization in prison is rare, but it becomes more likely where prisons look like ‘failed states’: where power works in illegitimate ways, moral vacuums arise, chaos and disorganisation exit (see Williams & Liebling, submitted). On the other hand, and here I am summarizing large and separate studies, exceptional, person-centred prisons in which justice and love can be found lead to better outcomes on all measures, including reconviction (Auty & Liebling, 2019). In the human struggle for life, mistreatment is toxic. We have strong evidence that the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ are fused; moral facts are ‘embedded in the substance of the social’ (Fassin, 2015, p. 4).

Because of the controlled nature of the environment, and because of its moral intensity, the particular and ‘the real’ are highly visible and can be linked to the general. We can ‘think within the subject’ rather than about it and observe ‘the order and connection of things’, as Spinoza and Durkheim proposed. We find, at least in prison, that there are moral rules in the universe – that the essence of life is ‘almost sacred’ (Davis, 2017b), but the source of the almost sacredness is our selves (see also Scruton, 2014; Williams, 2018).

3. George Eliot’s Concept of the Fundamental

For the third point, I want to use a quote, from Janet’s Repentance:

Within the four walls where the stir and glare of the world are shut out, and every voice is subdued – where a human being lies prostrate, thrown on the tender mercies of his fellow, the moral relation of man to man is reduced to its utmost clearness and simplicity: bigotry cannot confuse it, theory cannot pervert it, passion, awed into quiescence, can neither pollute nor perturb it. As we bend over the sick-bed, all the forces of our nature rush towards the channels of pity, of patience, and of love, and sweep down the miserable choking drift of our quarrels, our debates, our would-be wisdom, and our clamorous selfish desires. This blessing of serene freedom from the importunities of opinion lies in all simple direct acts of mercy, and is often one source of that sweet calm which is often felt by the watcher in the sick room, even when the duties are of a hard and terrible kind. (Ch. 24, p. 308: emphasis added)

2 I mean ‘moral facts’ as patterned, observable moral concepts that have explanatory significance: a form of naturalistic realism: if something is part of a genuine explanation of facts, it is appropriate to regard it as real (Sturgeon, 1985; Durkheim, 1893/2013). I am grateful to Jonathan Jacobs for continuing dialogue on this point. Fassin used the term ‘questions’, rather than facts, in his essay.
In the sick room, ‘near its end, human life [is] at its most minimal and yet fundamental’ … Human beings encounter ‘the revelation of an irreducible, overwhelmingly primary reality’ (Davis, 2017b, p. 74). The basic moral grammar of humankind erupts ‘beyond the to-ing and fro-ing of intellectual doubt’ (p. 75). ‘This was overwhelmingly the thing itself’; human values, or virtues – ‘primitive love’ and ‘the need to be merciful or to receive mercy’ - become less uncertain or disguised from us; they have an existential force at the end of life. It is an almost religious feeling. What she says here, I had just experienced at my Father’s bedside. But I had also felt this for thirty years in prison.

Prisons, I realized, are, ‘next only to death’, using the term used by Sean McConville for the title of his book about English Local Prisons (1995) in their capacity to concentrate the mind on what it is to be human. Paradoxically, because of what they make so rare (freedom, love, and dignity), they are uniquely amenable settings for locating the fundamental. Imagine for a moment the experience of being given a life sentence with a tariff of 35 years at the age of 18. This has become increasingly the case as the common law of joint enterprise has been used to hold all of those at the scene, and sometimes beyond, responsible for knife crimes, for example (Crewe et al., 2016; Hulley et al., 2019). The existential challenge for prisoners facing such sentences are extraordinary. ‘For the first few years’, said one, ‘I was struggling with my emotions’ (in Liebling et al., 2011).

Once they emerge from the early stages of their catastrophic, ‘life-trashing’ sentences (Simon, 2001), prisoners become the ‘unlikely representatives of the primary … and the fundamental’ (Davis, 2017b, p. 194) articulating, or making detectable, ‘the real’. The ‘raw material of moral sentiment’ (George Eliot Essays, p. 270, in Davis, 2017b, p. 201) is everywhere: the ‘right thing’ being felt, and expressed, in ‘the wrong place’ (Ibid, p. 202).

Counter-intuitively, being in, or even going to, a prison wakes up our moral imagination. There are good reasons for this. Prisoners talk with passion and clarity about ‘things that matter’. Existential questions become hard to avoid. There is a moral intensity to prison life, which is linked to the fact that they are places full of power and deprivation. Prisoners experience intense emotional responses to both. Patterns are discernible that make clear what is real and important about human social and moral life. Morality has an existential force (p. 362) in places that feel like hell (Midgley, 2005) or where ‘death, suffering and misery’ are found (Monk, 1991, p. 137). Prisoners ‘know’ things, about sorrow, regret, abandonment, unfairness, violence, loneliness, humanity, and the significance of mercy. We know that suffering and the ‘acquisition of knowledge’ are often linked (Davis 2017a, p. 393). Imprisonment can force a realization of what is meaningful, or of what matters. Human needs are ‘wrought back’ into feeling, both as a result of ‘the crisis event’ – or deprivation of liberty – and because of the exposure to intensified or power-infused forms of interaction on a day-to-day basis. Suffering subtracts from and diminishes life, but it can reveal what it is that is lacking, or precipitate the struggle for life.

Paradoxically, this is where ‘the living energy’ or the pulse of life is at its most powerful. It becomes especially clear when a felt ‘lack’ of, for example, humanity, is momentarily relieved. Extreme contrast (absence and presence) makes the prison something like a ‘moral laboratory’ in which what matters comes clear, prisoners can help us to conceptualize and, in the end, measure this, and once we have done so, variations between establishments with different moral climates and practices are found to be clearly linked to ‘survival’ and other important outcomes. Of course, not all prisoners are opened up by the experience of imprisonment. This is linked to the fact that the opportunities available, as well as the social and moral climates, differ significantly, as do prisoners’ characters and emotional lives. Some harden and narrow, or are otherwise diminished and damaged, by imprisonment. I describe possibilities grounded in experience here, arguing that it is important to understand the differences between expansive/empowering environments and destructive ones. These differences, as both Spinoza and Eliot would argue, tend to be relational (see Auty & Liebling, 2019). Survivable prisons
are characterized by higher levels of mercy, kindness, humanity and respect (but also fairness, clarity and safety) than unsurvivable prisons. My work diagnoses prisons culturally and morally, and this is what we have found (Liebling, with Arnold, 2004).

4. Authentic Description and its Moral Purpose.

The final point I want to make here is about authentic description. I have written about this before, drawing on George Eliot (Liebling, 1999a) but have come to understand the significance of ‘faithful representation’ more deeply following a return research exercise in a prison I had once known very well. Ten years after I had first studied it, it was changed. For all sorts of reasons, trust had stopped flowing, and the opposite scenario from the adjudication I described earlier had become the norm. Prisoners and staff were distant, and meaningful communication had ceased. The prison was dangerously violent. It was very difficult to get people to talk openly about what was going on. We (a team of three) spent 18 months trying to get under the surface, and then we wrote a report (Liebling et al., 2011). Everybody misunderstood everybody else. We described the prison as ‘paralysed by distrust’. The research task of ‘getting the description right’ was getting harder, but so was the work task of creating a normative order in which ‘meetings’ between whole persons were possible. This was a post 9/11 high security prison; 40 per cent of its prisoners were Muslim. Half of that number had converted to Islam in prison. Fear and risk permeated the atmosphere. No-one was willing to ‘name the elephant in the room’ or talk about what was going on (Liebling, 2011, 2015a). Un-meetings and failures of seeing were creating violence. That fuller story is still to be written; the point here is how right George Eliot was that the very difficult task of ‘faithful representation’ has a deep moral purpose.

Philosopher Iris Murdoch captures this problem and all that is at stake here:

For Murdoch, the most crucial moral virtue was a kind of attentiveness to detail, a wise, trained capacity for vision, which could see what was really going on in a situation and respond accordingly … For Murdoch, what so often keeps us from acting morally is not that we fail to follow the moral rules that tell us how to act; rather, it is that we misunderstand the situation before us [emphasis added]. When we describe the situation to ourselves, we simply get it wrong. (Jollimore, 2013, paras 16, 17)

As Eliot argued, the task of art and writing is ‘to enlarge the sympathies of others’; to understand, but also to promote understanding. She said:

‘the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures’. (Haight, 1954, The George Eliot Letters: III, 111. 5 July 1859)

What Eliot called ‘authentic representation’ is something which has a moral value. It reminds us of the reality and dignity of all people, enlarging our sympathies and teaching through the experience of others. Enduring truths are based on real human feeling and experience.

The aim of prison scholarship, I argue, is authentic description; ‘to make the prison world “intelligible”; to make moral blindness less likely or possible’ … and ‘to enlarge sympathies in ways that can reshape human consciousness and with it the structures of society’ (Liebling, 2015b, p. 30). We should try to be George Eliot in prison.

I argue in my work that what happens in prison can be seen as an intensified and highly visible version of what happens in human social environments more generally: the ways in which power flows and interpersonal relationships function shape outcomes. Order, safety, survival, and growth, in and out of prison, depend largely on what goes on between people. Like
human beings more generally, but in ways that can be clearly witnessed and described, prisoners need help, love and recognition if they are to ‘go on’. Lying at the intersection between the empirical, the normative and the conceptual, we find that human beings ‘shrink’ or they survive and or grow, according to the human vibrations around them – we come as close to the ‘sources of the basically human’ as it is possible to be.

My conclusions, then, as are follows. First, George Eliot shows us that human character develops and changes according to our relations to and treatment by others. We are works in progress: dynamic and emergent. We can be made, or destroyed, by other people. There are always possibilities for transformation and growth, but they are shaped mostly by interpersonal encounters, or our moral environment. One of the consequences of this position is that we should not draw firm conclusions about a person’s character or risk, or their trustworthiness/untrustworthiness, as if these are fixed, but should keep our minds open to the realities of change (Ashton, 2019; Williams & Liebling, submitted). Of course, we should also avoid wishful thinking and ‘comforting illusions’ (see Gatens, 2019, p. 238). Uncertainty and open-mindedness are necessary to our capacity for moral and intellectual judgment. More generally, George Eliot proposed that there is a moral reality to the universe. I find myself engaged in a long-term empirical project that strongly supports her case.

Secondly, the minds of others form part of this moral universe. Authors transform us too. Encounters with ideas – ‘the relations of one mind to another’ (Fleishman, 2011) – lead to discovery and the formation or expansion of identity. We found something like this in a recent study of the meaning and impact of Shared Reading in prison in which reading aloud in groups over time improved ratings on dimensions like ‘confidence and agency’ and ‘being myself’ (Liebling et al., 2021). The cultivation of sensibility and thinking in dialogue with other minds has value, whether those minds are writers or living companions. We can find love, recognition, companionship and the seeds for growth in books as well as in other people.

Thirdly, as criminologists, prison scholars, and human beings, we should be open to all that philosophy and literature have to offer. Saunders shows, in his ‘Four Russians’ study, how fiction ‘changes the way we think about ourselves’ (Saunders, 2021, p. 215):

> Reading “Master and Man” we begin living it; the words disappear, and we find ourselves thinking not about word choice but about the decisions the characters are making and decisions we have made, or might have to make some day, in our actual lives. (Saunders, 2021, p. 221)

When we are moved by an individual story, we understand the moral universe more clearly. Perhaps this is especially true of nineteenth century literature, ‘which told us about people’s emotions in staggering depth and revealed the most carefully hidden secrets of human nature’ (Altan, 2019, p. 175). Through feeling, and narrative, we grasp things; we pay ‘ethical attention’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. iv). Drawing on George Eliot, I have argued before that:

> The significance of the particular and the careful consideration of the general are equally relevant to ‘faithful representation’. Human feeling is a chief agent of realist research. In other words, our emotions do not need to be reconciled with our so-called data. They constitute data. They require critical reflection and triangulation, and ‘faithful representation’, but not selective inattention.’ (Liebling, 1999a, pp. 162-163)

Something about the prison experience, brutal as it is, generates, or is soothed by, philosophical insight. Suffering, injustice and degradation are harms to be avoided, but they ‘force the soul to cry out “why”? (Weil, tr. Doering, 2012, p. 66). Talking about philosophy in prison draws out different, perhaps more existential, dimensions of the lived experience from ‘standard’ accounts of needs and pains (words that can limit as well as invite). Philosophical dialogue encourages the cultivation of moral perception and sensitivity, or invites ‘moral imagination’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 45) in ways that can shape lives, both in and out of prison.
There is growing evidence from many studies of the positive effects of teaching philosophy and literature in prison (e.g. Szifris, 2021 and this volume).

Philosophy helps us to think, to know, and to live. We might encounter it through literature, philosophy classes, theatre, or other means (philosophical thinking underpins some cognitive behavioural courses, however lost that notion has become), with somewhat different meanings and effects, but however we encounter and engage with it, it helps us to test our assumptions, tackle our distortions, affirm what is best in us, uncover meaning, and grow. Our cognitive, emotional and moral progress is intertwined (Goldstein, 2020). That people in prison often find philosophy inspiring and relevant tells us a great deal: there are ‘deep questions at stake’ (Carlisle, 2019, p. 599) which are relevant to our struggle to live manageable lives.

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3 One of many fortunate events in my own journey - a key privilege of my professional teaching role - was encountering Kirstine Szifris and feeling excitement as her MPhil and PhD supervisor when she began to formulate her plan to teach philosophy in prison. I am delighted that she is now leading and publishing work in this field.
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No Cell for the Soul: 
Prison, Philosophy and Bernard Stiegler - A Short Appreciation

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Abstract: Bernard Stiegler was a French philosopher who served 5 years in prison for a series of bank robberies committed in his youth. He died in August 2020, aged just 68, a professor celebrated in the highest ranks of continental philosophy. Stiegler subsequently published over 30 books, at the core of which is the series tellingly gathered under the title ‘Time and Technics’. His essay, ‘How I became a Philosopher’, convinced me he, and it, should be on every prison philosophy course. In this article I outline why, as a convict criminologist, I feel an affinity with Stiegler’s project.

Keywords: Bernard Stiegler, philosophy, prison, convict criminology

“I wanted to play the role not of ex-convict but first of all of philosopher, discretely, out of this material, in remaining faithful to it but, in a sense, without citing my sources or resources.” (Bernard Stiegler, “How I became a Philosopher,” 2009, p. 33)

Before researching my book on convict criminology, I hadn’t realised how many people whose names I recognised as academics or literary figures had done ‘time’. Some are more well-known than others. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Wolde Soyinka, Ruth First, and Victor Serge, to name but a few, all wrote highly acclaimed books about their time inside. In my book I celebrate the political philosopher Peter Kropotkin’s contributions to criminology and note the way his extraordinary analysis of prisons (Kropotkin, 1878) draws from his own experience of imprisonment in France and Russia (Earle, 2016). The political context of the imprisonment endured by these exemplars is perhaps a special case, although critical scholars of crime should be wary of any ease they find in making a distinction between crime and politics (Cohen, 1996).

Bernard Stiegler was a French philosopher who served 5 years in prison for a series of bank robberies committed in his youth. He died in August 2020, aged just 68, a professor celebrated in the highest ranks of continental philosophy. Bank robbers are an important criminological archetype featuring heavily in the public imagination, popular fiction, penal symbolism, and The Clash1 songbook. You can’t really say the same for philosophers, about whom pop songs are rarely written. Among criminologists, bank-robbers are commonly seen as the ‘professionals’ of the ‘underworld’, skilled in planning and daring-do, the craftsmen of crime. They embody the masculine codes of class resistance and refusal examined in Eric Hobsbawms’ (2001) classic study, Bandits (see also Hobbes, 2013). Bank-robbers are romanticised in countless films and television series as heroic figures. This was the classic role taken by Victor Serge, a celebrated novelist, memoirist, and political agitator who became involved

1 Bankrobber, by The Clash, opening lines “My daddy was a bankrobber/But he never hurt nobody/he just loved to live that way/and he loved to steal your money…“
with a group of anarchists for whom robbing banks in early 20th century France was deemed an essential part of the international class struggle sweeping Europe. Unfortunately, they were as criminally adept as they were politically sophisticated and their chosen method of advancing the class struggle was short-lived. Serge was caught in a police ambush during one of their botched bank raids. Bravely refusing to divulge the names of his comrades under threat of torture and a heavier sentence, Serge did a long stint in various French prisons which formed the basis of his non-fiction novel, *Men in Prison* (Serge, 1931/1977). It is a brilliant book about both, its pithy title enclosing with three words much of what contemporary penology is about.

Stiegler, like Serge, was inspired by the prospects of insurrections in France. As a teenager in 1968 he was swept up in the revolutionary upheavals shaking various European states as their colonies in Africa and South East Asia asserted their determination to attempt their own futures rather than simply provision Europe’s. Paris was brushed with revolutionary hope and Stiegler was on the barricades that sprang up across the city. As the barricades came down and the insurrection faded, Stiegler moved on to indulge his love of jazz music by running a jazz café in the south of France. His facility for improvisation and distaste for the conventions of capitalist debt management led to a series of armed bank raids designed to pay off the overdrafts accrued by the jazz café ventures. On his fourth bank raid an unrepentant Stiegler was caught and subsequently jailed. His five years in prison, from 1978 -1983, turned out to be the making of the philosopher.

A prison cell provides philosophers with plenty to think about, but their reflections are usually more hypothetical and speculative rather than based on the actual experience of imprisonment. Stiegler entered prison with ideas of his own about life and philosophy influenced by the Communist party, of which he had been a member: “I believed philosophers were necessarily on the wrong side, to the degree that they are inevitably on the side of the interpretation of the world and not of changing the state of things” (Stiegler, 2009, p. 31).

He was not prepared for the philosophical challenge that confronted him in prison. This involved an acute existential threat - the disappearance of the world and the disappearance of himself. In prison he found the abstract concerns of philosophy had become concrete:

> The conditions of the constitution of the world appear in the absence of the world in particular as the impossibility of choosing – one’s clothes, one’s home, one friends, the use of one’s time, and so on – and consequently of articulating and arranging. The world is being-toward-the-world, I then began to enter into Being and Time. (Stiegler, 2009, p. 26)

In the decommissioned society of the prison, life is what you make it since you’ve got the time and so little else. This is what Stiegler discovered via a sustained reading of Heidegger: “In prison I permanently and in a kind of pure way had the experience of the remains that framed me and that in the end I am”. In being removed from the world, he concluded its possibilities are constituted by a transcendental ego, by a subjectivity in continual correspondence with its material surroundings. Reading Heidegger inevitably led to his “avidly reading” Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. On leaving prison in 1983, he proceeded directly to Paris and Derrida himself at the École Normale Supérieure, France’s most prestigious university. Derrida was impressed enough with the ex-convict’s intellect to provide work and company. Stiegler subsequently published over 30 books, at the core of which is the series tellingly gathered under the title *Time and Technics*. This substantial and influential oeuvre represents his efforts to persuade himself and his readers that philosophers were not on the wrong side of history, and that he could reconcile his materialism with his idealism. Significantly, he puts down the vigour, rigour, and vitality of his efforts, to his period of imprisonment. This attribution was itself prompted, relatively late in his career, by an invitation from Marianne Alphant in 2002 to contribute to a prestigious series of lectures at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in which philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” Karl Marx, Thesis Eleven, Theses on Feuerbach
Losophers would be invited to respond to the questions “Why and how has one become a philosopher? Why does one remain a philosopher?”. His response appears in the form of an essay ‘How I became a philosopher’ gathered in a collection published by Stanford University press in 2009. Although this collection remains all I possess of Stiegler’s work, it convinced me he, and it, should be on every prison philosophy course. Given my ignorance of such courses, it is possible that this is already the case, but I fear otherwise, so below I outline why, as a convict criminologist, I feel an affinity with Stiegler’s project.

Political philosophers like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau who focus on everyday life and the way we find meaning and some kind of fulfilment in the routines of going-to-work, paying-the-bills, managing the day-to-day, would appreciate the significance of their removal in prison. With basic food and shelter guaranteed and provided, the dull patterns of prison life remove the (sometimes not so) gentle imperatives of day-to-day survival and replace them with empty echoes, a penal simulacra of everyday life in spaces where every surface, every wall, corner and corridor has the recognisable imprint of control and regulation. No door in prison is innocent of its function. As the French filmmaker Robert Bresson, who had himself spent time behind bars in a German prisoner-of-war camp, observes, “When you are in prison, the most important thing is the door” (Bresson, 2009, p. 28). And this because it operates as both metaphor and material reality.

On the outside of a prison, questions of who owns the spaces of life, why they vary as they do, what convolutions of their various histories have shaped them, and whose interests are best served by the spaces you inhabit, are relatively obscure, discovered perhaps by students of urban sociology or property developers. Inside prison, spatial and temporal practice is rarely so neutral, innocent, or obscure. They confront the prisoner at every turn. A prisoner studying with the Open University reported the almost unbearable realisations that accompanied their growing immersion in studying psychology and sociology:

Attitudes, roles and structures are so easy to see in here and so unchanging, and I had nothing else to think about. I spent weeks feeling as though I was behind a glass window, just watching it all. I could barely speak to people.
(cited in Weinbren, 2019, p. 64)

That sense of being removed from the world and of a world revealed is unsettling, the feeling of a glass barrier a telling description of the vicissitudes of prison studying. It can be like discovering how the misting effect of one’s own breath on the glass window reveals what you can see through but not pass through. It almost rendered the student speechless, a prisoner still, on the edge of an unknown freedom.

Encountering Hobbes’ Leviathan or Rousseau’s Social Contract in the pages of a sociology textbook is one thing, but to find the ideas almost literally stalking your footsteps is another. Being introduced to Max Weber’s account of the reconstitution of the human subject under bureaucratic capitalism in ‘a shell as hard as steel’, a prisoner may recognise certain features of the ‘iron cage’ as something more than a famous metaphor. A prisoner may be more easily convinced of Weber’s (1919) suggestion that the state is not just a random political association but a “relation of men dominating men” because he (and more than 9 times out of 10 a prisoner is a man) has been thrown into the cold, calculating heart of this association – it’s ultimate concrete and situated reality.

The interminable proximity of the subjective and the objective inevitably pull a prison student of philosophy toward a style of phenomenological thinking, a kind of thinking wherein their experience amounts to something. For Stiegler it was more than a style. It was salvation. Philosophy, to Stiegler, is a forceful, loud, vocation far removed from its reputation, perhaps in England more than France, as ‘scholastic chatter’ drifting across the academic greenery of Oxford and Cambridge.

The prison paradox is that in cages better designed for animals is revealed Aristotle’s
primal human – the zoon politikon. This figure of the human, so familiar to African existential philosophy (Fanon, 1986; Gordon, 2000), is the figure who can be human only so far as they can be social. The specifically political clash between this figure and the state is explored to great effect in Susan Easton’s (2018) recent book but Stiegler’s project is more oblique, perhaps more continental: to explore the time of the individual – a life – and the time of the group, a kind of species-time out of which societies are fashioned and things made. Time and Technics.

Stiegler likens the situation and experience of being in prison as revealing the world to him as water might, hypothetically, be revealed to a flying-fish as it leaves the water for the air (see Kouppanou, 2013). His removal from the natural world of ‘ordinary life’ by his imprisonment brought aspects of life into view that would otherwise remain invisible, taken for granted. Significantly for my purposes as a convict criminologist, Stiegler refers to the ‘après-coup’ – a term from psychoanalysis that refers to something an individual experiences at a certain time but makes sense of only later. An experience that leaves traces that may be gathered together after the event, after a necessary elapse of time. Stiegler refers to the connection he found between his life, his work and his prison cell like this:

I thus discovered what one calls in philosophy the phenomenological epokhe—the suspension of the world, of the thesis of the world, that is, of the spontaneous belief in the existence of the world, which constitutes in Husserl’s language the natural attitude –what I previously called ordinary life. I discovered this philosophical theory and practice by chance and by accident, long before studying it in the works of Husserl: I deduced it from the situation… (Stiegler, 2009, p. 22)

In ‘How I became a Philosopher’ Stiegler confesses that “up to the age of 26 I had not ever philosophised” but discovered its absolute necessity in his prison cell. It was only later, on being urged to ‘reminisce’ on the origins of his thinking by Alphant’s initiative, that he realised what he had “effaced from memory” and the invitation allowed him to “plunge back into moments [he] had forced into the background of [his] existence”. These consisted of “five years incarceration… spent in philosophical practice, in experimental phenomenology, and in passage to the limits of phenomenology…”.

In phrases that recall aspects of Oscar Wilde’s (1905) extraordinary meditation on the experience of imprisonment Stiegler finds that:

Deprived of an ‘exterior milieu’, my ‘interior milieu’ took on that incomprehensible depth and weight sought after by mystics and ascetics… Absent, the world reigned in my cloister like ‘the absence of all bouquet’…. I no longer lived in the world but rather the absence of a world (Stiegler, 2009, p. 26)

He declares that the denials of imprisonment form an “ascetism without end” but then, like Serge before him, he discovers “a victory over jail is a great victory. At certain moments you feel astonishingly free” (Serge, 1931/1977, p. 66):

One perceives with astonishment that, in that cell, one is much more free, or at least that liberty is much more accessible there, much purer, appearing then essentially as fragility, as what is intrinsically fragile, that which must be made the object of the whole of one’s care. (Stiegler, 2009, pp. 20-21)

In De Profundis, Wilde declares from his experience of prison that “religion does not help me…. Reason does not help me...” and that finally his salvation is “the ethical evolution” of his own character: “I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me” (Wilde, 1905, cited in ArtAngel, 2016, p.111). Stiegler’s evocation in Acting Out of vulnerability as the essence of human freedom and around which prison throws its toxic enclosure, is described as ‘the virtue of prison’. In doing so he refers to a kind of triumph that many prison writers, and probably many prison non-writers, will recognise. Malcolm X (1965/2007) for example writes in his autobiography of prison giving him ‘the gift of time’. In prison, he is
temporarily released from the grinding struggle to simply exist in a racist society that denies his very being as a black man, much as it constrains his means to survive, to find food and shelter (see Bakkali, 2019; Curry, 2017). As a result, he takes the opportunity to educate himself in prison, so eloquently described in a section sub-titled ‘Learning to Read’ in his autobiography.

The ‘virtue of prison’ is its most seductive, dangerous and sustaining feature. The ‘gift’ to prisoners of the time to find themselves in themselves alone was the basis of the silent and separate systems and remains the fundamental principle of the penitentiary underpinning modern prisons. The ideas of individual reform and rehabilitation around which modern prisons reproduce themselves are based not on success but perpetually productive failure, as Foucault (1979) points out. It is sometimes the case that the exceptions provided by the likes of Stiegler and Malcolm X, and others, are appropriated as examples of what the prison can do, while the fate of Oscar Wilde is forgotten as an example of what they more routinely achieve (see Maguire, 2020). A facile identification with ‘the virtue of prison’ as the condition of its possibility reinforces the obstinate idea of prison as a place where a prisoner will reach into themselves so they may re-enter society reformed, rehabilitated. Prisons pivot so easily from philanthropy on the outside to misanthropy on the inside. Populations outside prison are persuaded by the exceptional philanthropy of reform and rehabilitation, populations inside encounter the neglect and abandonment of the misanthropy.

Rodriguez (2003), albeit writing under the shadow of the US carceral atrocity, cautions against a focus on the exceptional experiences of a few incarcerated intellectuals because of the unintended effect it has in deflecting attention from the experiences of the mass of prisoners. He notes the fetishization of the ‘prison intellectual’ and the celebrity literary survivor. While I support his argument for more radical counter-hegemonic prison praxis that seeks out an engagement with prisoners on terms the prison, as an ideological complex, can accommodate less comfortably, I find his argument around fetishization of particular intellectuals less convincing. I am not aware of this tendency in the UK and other parts of Europe. Indeed, the historic antipathy toward intellectuals in England, in particular, is more likely to fuel the current fetishization of ‘raw experience’ out of which is emerging a trend in policy activism toward un-theorised, apparently un-theorisable, ‘lived experience’ (Warr, 2021).

There is a poignant irony in the fact that Stiegler’s journey into philosophy from the prison cell, a place so resistant to deconstruction (see Knight & Turner, 2019) produces a philosopher so fully committed to the deconstructive method. His philosophy has little traction in the English-speaking world and outside the circuits of continental philosophy he is relatively unknown. His final book is intriguingly addressed to ‘The Lesson of Greta Thunberg’ (Stiegler, 2019). Far from being a belated attempt to widen his appeal by jumping on her bandwagon, it is a powerful appeal to her young generation, a generation he fears is to be overwhelmed by ‘the new barbarians’ of a digital technocracy. It is a bleak vision, summed up by Leonid Bilmes (2019):

The catastrophe of the digital age is that the global economy, powered by computational ‘reason’ and driven by profit, is foreclosing the horizon of independent reflection for the majority of our species, in so far as we remain unaware that our thinking is so often being constricted by lines of code intended to anticipate, and actively shape, consciousness itself.

So far, so apocalyptic (see also Kitchin & Fraser, 2020; Wacjman, 2015). But Stiegler is no ‘Luddite’ who simply wants to trash and smash the digital technologies increasingly shaping our world. True to his Marxist habits, he wants to change the world by knowing it better. The algorithms that generate the predictive text on your phone is not an innocent convenience, according to Stiegler, but a threat to thought itself. Think about that. Think about a government intent on increasing prison capacity and reducing university capacity. As Bilmes insists “What Stiegler hopes for most of all is to get his readers ‘to dream again’ – to become politically hope-
” Perhaps that’s another lesson learned in his prison cell. Is it one we find easier to teach in prisons than universities?
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‘…In the Secret of one’s Life’: Bernard Stiegler and Philosophy in the Intimacy of his Prison Cell

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Abstract: In his book, Acting Out, philosopher Bernard Stiegler confesses that the question once posed to him by Marianne Alphant – namely, ‘How does one become a philosopher in the intimacy and secret of one’s life?’ threw him ‘into an embarrassing position’, mainly because Stiegler became a philosopher in the intimacy of his prison cell. There is no question that from Socrates to Antonio Gramsci, there have been philosophers who have suffered shorter or longer periods of imprisonment, but this was mainly because of their philosophy – their individuated way of being and thinking. In Bernard Stiegler’s case, it appears that the terms are reversed – in other words, the philosopher emerges as the philosopher he is because of and through imprisonment. This reversal is taken provisionally here, since this paper problematises the very notions of philosophical writing, philosophical acting, and origin, repositioning thus the question of writing, authorship, technology and individuation – namely, the central notions of Bernard Stiegler’s philosophy.

Keywords: Bernard Stiegler, prison, exteriorisation, technology, anamnesis, hypomnesis

Introduction

In the short essay, How I Became a Philosopher, found in his book, Acting Out, philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2009) reminisces over the five years he lived incarcerated in a French prison. The narration is deeply personal and quite touching. However, what makes this text quite interesting is not simply Stiegler’s biographical references, but the act of philosophising unfolding through biographical writing – that is, through a certain act of reminiscence that makes Stiegler’s philosophy, life, and exteriorised memory accessible to the reader. This process of exteriorisation is itself at the heart of Stieglerian philosophy. Exteriorisation does not suggest the existence of a prior intact interior memory that emerges and finds expression through writing, but rather that the interior itself first becomes possible with this exteriorisation (Kouppanou, 2018). In other words, one cannot help but wonder: Does the narrator of this essay refer back to the convict who begins ‘empirically and savagely’ (Stiegler, 2009, p. 22) to philosophise or does the narrative function belong to the mature philosopher who reiterates a convict’s process of becoming a philosopher after the fact? The matters of identity, writing, origin, time and memory are pertinent to such questions and to Stiegler’s philosophy in general. In this framework, we could also wonder about the nature of this particular text – that is, if the text itself narrates the origin of its author – indeed, of this particular philosophical author that emerges through imprisonment – or if the text is itself an archive of exteriorised memory, offering a movement of differentiated multiple selves or even constituting a being without a self at all.
As indicated in the previous paragraph, my own transaction with Stiegler’s text often takes a deconstructive turn: Stiegler’s particular piece of writing can be received as his individuated negotiation with Derridean differance, turning thus the essay itself into a processual object, unfolding as the very condition allowing its writer to differentiate themselves and become the writer of such text. My reading, however, can also maintain a Heideggerian phenomenological-hermeneutical lens. It allows the reception of the text as the process during which the narrator is hermeneutically constituted as a being-in-the-world – in fact, through the very interpretation the writer puts forth of himself and of this world. In this way, the text constitutes the author’s documentation of his personal individuation process through his discovery of a phenomenological praxis.

These two types of reading coincide with Stiegler’s process of becoming a philosopher and with his own individuation (his becoming a certain philosophical being with particular characteristics). This double reading also resonates with Stiegler’s process of reading himself as a philosopher who goes through a process of emergence. To be more specific, Stiegler’s imprisonment becomes a route leading to phenomenology and to phenomenology’s essential attitude of suspending the world and the taken for granted beliefs that come along with it. To unpack this a little, we need to remember that Edmund Husserl (see Stiegler, 1998) considered the phenomenological epokhe as the attitude creating distance between the philosopher and the world, allowing them to see things as for the first time – indeed, to see things in themselves. In Stiegler’s case, epokhe becomes the condition imposed on him by the world, which is no longer available to him – in any case, not in the form he was used to. Stiegler’s (2009) discovery of phenomenology is presented below. As the philosopher explains:

I thus discovered what one calls in philosophy the phenomenological Epokhe – the suspension of the world, of the thesis of the world, that is, of the spontaneous belief in the existence of the world, which constitutes in Husserl’s language the natural attitude – what I previously called ordinary life. I discovered this philosophical theory and practice by chance and by accident, long before studying it in the works of Husserl: I deduced it from the situation, I practiced it, in a way, empirically and savagely. When I discovered it formulated and theorized by phenomenology, I found myself in a state of unimaginable excitement. (p. 22)

For Stiegler, the experience of disconnection from the world and the suspension of the natural attitude, which allows the habitual perception of the world, came all to naturally to him – albeit forcefully, because of prison. To experience this space of reflective dissonance – the state of the world’s breaking down, is to allow for that nexus that makes up the world, the nodes and the connecting lines, to come to the fore in a different light. Such a way of seeing things is desirable and yet trying, since that which is closest to us, and thus a condition of our way of being, is often not visible at all. Stiegler, relying on Aristotle, comments on the process:

[T]his milieu, because it is that which is most close, is that which is structurally forgotten, just as water is for a fish. The milieu is forgotten, because it effaces itself before that to which it gives place. There is always already a milieu, but this fact escapes us in the same way that “aquatic animals,” as Aristotle says, “do not notice that one wet body touches another wet body” (423ab): water is what the fish always sees; it is what it never sees. (p. 14)

The phenomenological echoes are strong here – coming from Martin Heidegger, Husserl’s student, this time. For Heidegger (2008), the human being is defined by its tendency to nearness: we exist by drawing the world near and through this nearness. Heidegger’s own existential hermeneutics consists in the acknowledgment that we are always already thrown into this world. In other words, we are not interior immaterial selves attempting to connect with a hypothetical Cartesian material outside. We are, rather, beings always already in the world –
existing in relations of interconnection to this world and through our always already situated understandings of this world. It is for this reason, that the Husserlian phenomenological suspension of the world is a peculiar kind of dwelling, from which Heidegger moves away. Heidegger, instead, fully embraces the inseparability of human being and the world, turning this inescapable hermeneutical cycle into an ontological one: We can never be without a world: We exist in this world through our understanding of ourselves, the world, beings and Being (namely that which allows the emergence of beings) – in a constant negotiation of farness and nearness, mediated through language and technology. Stiegler, can be said, found himself in this process of negotiating the far and the close, that is, indeed in the Heideggerian hermeneutical cycle. In the non-world of prison, which was still a world and part of this world, Stiegler (2009) was able to think about the ‘milieu while being able to extract (him) self from it, in the same way as a flying fish can leave the water: intermittently’ (p. 14). In other words, Stiegler was able to think about that which allows the emergence of Being/beings. This rare positionality allows him to realise that his main means of connecting to the world unfold through recollection – in fact, through his access to the exteriorised memories found in the prison library. This recapitulates, for him, the phenomenological turn to things, which, in turn, leads Stiegler to poststructurally focus on the material supplemental nature of memory and on the technological mediation of the world.

Anamnesis and Hypomnesis

The text, How I Became a Philosopher, is quite personal in tone, autobiographical, confessional even, and as such a process of mystery – raising the question concerning the origin of the author (see Foucault, 1979; Derrida, 1997): Indeed, is the author the signifier produced by the writing process or does the author constitute the signified, which is attached to the author’s historical presence? The essay repositions this particular poststructuralist concern – raising this time the question of the philosopher – that is, the philosopher as a particular type of writer – and philosophising, as a particular kind of writing, asking: Does the essay constitute a confessional account of someone who once was in the process of becoming a philosopher or does the text belong to a philosopher who has always already emerged as a particular kind of philosopher – reitering himself through this particular philosophical concern? In other words, and this is what Bernard Stiegler (1998) asserts, this is a text of a philosopher reading himself as a philosopher ‘après-coup’, that is, after the fact. The possibility of experiencing something after the fact is quite an important notion in Stiegler, suggesting the cycle of exteriorisation, during which the inside and the outside blur into a synergistical process of mutual emergence. In this respect, Stiegler’s philosophical writing is itself a process of exteriorisation returning to reconfigure the interior and suggesting that there is no absolute origin – no authorial interior, no beginning, no moment of origin in time.

Time is Stiegler’s question. For the philosopher, there is no moment that is autonomous and auto-affective. The present is rather a constant synthesis of presences and absences coming from the past and the future. In Stiegler’s case, the absence of the world comes with imprisonment. Because of the felt scarcity of things, Stiegler experiences the need and thus attempts to go back to the things themselves. The ‘natural attitude’ is naturally suspended. Phenomenology becomes both a necessity and a discovery. Very soon, Stiegler comes to discover that there is no going back to the thing – indeed, there is no thing-in-itself, only a thing which refers to another thing and to another. In this way, things function as suspensions of other things – even of themselves – and thus act as traces. Realising this withdrawal, Stiegler (2009) gets the ‘chance to consider this world as does a fish flying, above its element – an elementary milieu totally constituted by supplements, where the element, in other words, is always lacking’ (pp. 14-15). Presence – as origin, spoken word or interior thought – is lacking because the origin is always constituted by presences and absences, supplemented externally, materially, and accidentally. In this respect, Stiegler (2009) moves towards post-structuralism, explaining that he ‘no longer lived in the world, but rather in the absence of a world, which presented itself […] not only as a default, but as that which is always in default, and as a necessary default [un défaut qu’il
There is no thing as the thing in itself; there is no origin, but an original lack of origin that is constantly compensated for, sustained and re-inscribed through the supplement, which is secondary and indispensable. Stiegler’s (1998) phenomenological look is thus turned into a deconstructive one, concentrated on the supplement that sustains the world. Supplements, which are technological, linguistic, or both, contain ‘tertiary retentions’ or ‘hypomnesic traces’ – that is, traces which are not contained in the mind, but rather outside of it. These traces participate in perception, since we can access them repeatedly and differentially; they are memory externalised in space. A book is such a repository of tertiary memories. The book gives access to memory, which is not mine – yet inherited by me, and thus participates in the process of my self-differentiation, but also in its own process of individuation through my reconstitution of it. This paper is such a ‘mnemotechnic’ device – a technology (techne) (see Stiegler, 1998) made of memories (mneme[s]) that belong to me and Stiegler, Heidegger, Husserl, Derrida and to so many other thinkers. In other words, this paper is a testament to the process of individuation of writers, of readers, and of readers becoming writers because of the technology of books. No second reading can produce the same interpretation. The book is not identical to itself as the reader is not identical to themselves with each and every reading. The temporal object which can be accessed repeatedly underlines thus the default of origin and the supplementarity of language and technology (Stiegler, 1998, p. 18). Most of all, it underlines the role of hypomnnesis in the unfolding of perception.

Traditionally, western philosophy has prioritized anamnesis over hypomnnesis. Both words contain the Greek etymon for memory – namely, mneme. Anamnesis, however, refers to an immediate remembering, an authentic temporality, which is accessed without the mediation of technology and thus resembles aletheia, that is, truth as the bringing out of forgetfulness (Derrida, 1981). The understanding of truth as remembering is founded by Greek philosophy (see Heidegger, 1999). Stiegler (2009) comments, for example, that in the Platonic dialogue, Meno, Socrates argues that what he is attempting to define, namely, virtue, and ultimately the truth about its nature, is a knowledge that our souls used to possess but now have lost. Stiegler, adds: ‘From then on, cognition is recognition, a remembering – an anamnesis’ (p. 15). Hypomnnesis, conversely, is downgraded. It refers to a secondary type of remembering; it is memory found externally, located in the technological supplement. In Phaedrus, we witness another example of this dichotomy solidifying western thought, since Plato opposes anamnesis to hypomnnesis (the writing of books), understanding it as a technics that supplements the purported defective body, by replacing true memory with artificial memory. This supplementation process is considered to be eventually weakening memory, leading the human being to a radical forgetfulness. Hypomnnesis is therefore presented as the figure of technics par excellence or as the dead simulacrum that replaces life itself (p. 15).

Hypomnnesis will be revisited obsessively by Stiegler. His reading of Plato’s Protagoras and more specifically his interpretation of the myth of Prometheus allows him to illuminate the ‘origin of technics’ as the ‘origin of mortality’ (Stiegler, 1998, p. 16). According to the myth, the twin titans Prometheus and Epimetheus are charged with the task of handing over powers to the beasts by way of compensating for their weaknesses. Epimetheus proceeds with this task, forgetting the human being and thus leaving it a-logo (without reason). Prometheus, while attempting to atone for his brother’s forgetfulness, steals the arts and the fire from Athena and Hephaestus. In this way, Stiegler (1998) comments, the human being comes into being out of a double fault; the accidental forgetting of Epimetheus and Prometheus’ theft. This fault, he repeats, ‘is nothing but the de-fault of origin or the origin as de-fault’ (p. 188). Stiegler’s theory is thus built on these pillars – namely, on the accidental nature of the human being, the indispensability of technics for humanisation, and the constitution of time as reproduction because of this original de-fault. In this respect, Stiegler’s goal is to solidify the role of the technical realm for the giveness of time, thinking, imagination, and individuation and to emphasise the
political significance of this event. In the short section below, this is discussed.

**Conclusion: A Few Words on Stiegler’s Many Political Thoughts**

Reading Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida through a deconstructive lens – post-humanist even, Stiegler detects the contributing role of representation for perception and of the technological artifact for the constitution of human nature, which at any time can be considered not to be human at all. Memory allows the reception of the present moment and the formation of imagination and thus the human being’s projection into the future. In Husserl, there is an emphasis on the way that the time that has elapsed is retained in order for the present moment to have meaning and for anticipation to be formed. For Stiegler (1998), this association takes place through imagination that retains and associates the past with the present. The fact, however, that the past is accessed technologically points to imagination’s dependence on the technological realm and on exteriorised memory. This goes against both Heidegger and Kant. In Stiegler, technics offers access to memory, which is not one’s own but inherited by them. Technological structures form our milieu, our already-there, and this is how our anticipation is formed. It is also in this manner that technology becomes the limit of our thought; our ‘retentional finitude’ (p. 17).

When, however, technics, through its potentiality to retain past memories, enters processes that are supposedly auto-affective, namely imagination, perception, and time, then the question of the type of retentions that are to form thinking becomes political. Technics, has the nature of ‘pro-thesis’, which means that technology is ‘placed before us [la technique est ce qui nous est pro-posé] (in an originary knowledge, a mathesis that “pro-poses” us things)’ (Stiegler, 1998, p. 235). In other words, technology is a form of learning (mathesis) that happens in us without us. Technology is passive learning: We are formed as thinking beings according to the technological structure of our world. In a way we are learnt by machines, instead of us learning about them and through them. In order for this to become clear, we can bring to mind how search engines function, having always already proposed the criteria for the selection of the knowledge that comes near to us (Kouppanou, 2018). These algorithmic criteria are not chosen by me; I am not even aware of them. Still, these are the criteria defining what is possible for me to know, forming the limits of my knowledge and of my world. In this respect, the one who controls our retentions controls our minds. In our current context, it is the digital media and culture industries that control what is to be retained or not, organising therefore our imagination and setting the conditions for individuation – that is, the way individuals become beings with specific characteristics.

With a series of articles and books, such as *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010a) and others (2010b, 2011), Stiegler discusses the political aspects of technics. This discussion, he argues, ultimately needs to become a question about the *polis* (the City as the arena of democracy) and education. He thus detects a new responsibility of caring that should be of concern of the state, the educational systems and society in general. This is a responsibility about the formation of attention, the individuation of citizens, and the choice of the factors that ultimately form and affect individuation. Stiegler (2010) says

And this is not simply a question of the education system. It also concerns the *political milieu* constituted by the *state of minds* that are themselves nothing other than diversely structured attentional flux, more or less attentive and thoughtful, composing this milieu either as critical, rational consciousness (maturity) or as an agglomeration of gregarious behaviors and the immature brains of minors, artificial crowds whose consciousness has been enucleated by a regressive process of identification. This means that the matter of the ecology of mind is also that of the ecology of the political milieu, and the transformations in the political elements – in the sense that water is the fish’s element, just as the political element is integrally organological: there is no
“natural element” of the political – “natural law” is a fiction.

The human mind is exteriorised – it is an organ outside of the human body or extended beyond the flesh – feeding it with memories, forming the potential of that which can be and can be imagined in general. This is the arena of learning and of political thinking and acting: it is the water of the human fish. It is everywhere and nowhere to be seen. Returning to the same Aristotelian metaphor: technology is our water. It is what we inhabit but never really see. It is our elemental milieu, which is always already there and always already lacking, in the sense that it can be reconfigured, restricted and reimagined. In its twofold nature, our technological ecology is also pharmacological – on the one hand, it can poison the mind, and on the other, it can cure it by forming it otherwise. In its indeterminateness and accidentality, our milieu remains open for discussion and for transformation. Stiegler’s (2009) own experience of imprisonment proves that our processes of individuation are always already processes of transindividuation, that is, of becoming with others and in a specific somewhere. Stiegler, himself, comments about the origin of his philosophical reasoning: ‘I was able to enter philosophy properly speaking by accident, therefore, but also thanks to the laws of the City: the spirit of the laws of the French Republic meant that there was a library in this old prison’ (p. 22). This is how, technology, learning, and the political meet each other.
References


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Philosophy in Prisons and the Cultivation of Intellectual Character

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Abstract: There have recently been a series of prominent projects in the UK that aim to bring philosophy into the heart of prison education. The aim of this paper is to consider a possible rationale for this pedagogical development. A distinction is drawn between a content and a sensibility approach to teaching philosophy, where the latter is primarily concerned not with teaching a particular subject matter but rather with developing a certain kind of critical expertise. It is argued that the sensibility conception of teaching philosophy dovetails with an influential account of the epistemic aim of education in terms of the cultivation of intellectual character, in the specific sense of developing the intellectual virtues that constitute one’s intellectual character (i.e., virtuous intellectual character). The significance of this point for prison education is illustrated by considering how the use of a pedagogical approach in prison education known as CoPI (‘Community of Philosophical Inquiry’) can be construed as teaching philosophy on the sensibility model just outlined. With this in mind, it is argued that the value of teaching philosophy in prisons primarily relates to how it provides a particularly fundamental kind of education, one that is both finally and instrumentally valuable. These points are illustrated throughout by considering a particular case study involving a recent philosophy in prisons project that employed the CoPI methodology.

Keywords: prison education, philosophy of education, community of philosophical inquiry, virtue epistemology, philosophy in prisons, epistemology

Why Teach Philosophy in Prison

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the UK in the idea of teaching philosophy in prisons, with numerous initiatives being launched for just this purpose. One challenge facing any such project is to explain why philosophy, specifically, should be taught in this context. In particular, wouldn’t it be more beneficial for prisoners to be taught expertise of a more practical nature, such as accountancy or electrical engineering? This issue dovetails with a further question, which is what we take ourselves to be doing when we teach philosophy in prisons (which may or may not be different from what we take ourselves to be doing when we teach philosophy more generally). The reason why the two questions inter-relate is that one can view the teaching of philosophy as itself offering a kind of practical expertise, albeit of

1 Some recent examples: the University of Aberdeen ran a project (2012-13) bringing philosophy into a local prison (HMP Aberdeen); Kirstine Szifris has run philosophy in prisons projects (2014-17) at HMP Grendon, HMP Full Sutton, and HMP Thorn Cross; and since 2016 KCL has been running a philosophy in prisons project at HMP Belmarsh, a project that has led to the creation of the nationwide Philosophy in Prison charity (see www.philosophyinprison.com). There is also the philosophy in prisons project that has been run by the University of Edinburgh since 2014, which is described in more detail below. See Szifris (2016; 2018) for further discussion of the philosophy in prison projects that she ran.

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In particular, we can differentiate in this regard between two different ways in which one might teach philosophy. One might approach the teaching of philosophy by focusing on imparting the subject matter of philosophy—i.e., philosophical ideas and theses, and the history of the discipline. In this content approach to teaching the subject, teaching philosophy isn’t essentially any different from teaching any other subject matter, such as civil engineering or organic chemistry. There is an alternative conception of teaching philosophy, however, whereby one’s overarching goal is not imparting a body of knowledge at all, but rather cultivating a kind of critical sensibility that is characteristic of a philosophical engagement with a topic. Call this the sensibility approach.

In practice, of course, this distinction does not manifest itself in a clear-cut fashion, not least because often one is aiming, to varying degrees, to achieve both aims—i.e., to impart knowledge of the subject matter of philosophy and develop the kind of expertise that is associated with good philosophical inquiry. Nonetheless, the distinction is useful to bear in mind, since the two approaches can come completely apart. In particular, in line with the content approach, one could potentially teach the subject matter of philosophy without thereby cultivating any kind of critical philosophical sensibility at all. Conversely, in line with the sensibility approach, one could in principle cultivate a critical philosophical sensibility without in the process imparting any knowledge of the subject matter of philosophy.

This distinction between a content and a sensibility conception of teaching philosophy is especially important when it comes to prison education since the particular initiatives that bring philosophy into prison education that are of concern to us are of the latter kind, with a focus on developing a kind of philosophical expertise rather than teaching the subject matter of philosophy. Indeed, they are often especially pure manifestations of the sensibility conception of teaching philosophy, in that philosophical subject matter barely enters into the proceedings. For example, a number of philosophy in prison education initiatives employ approaches to teaching philosophy like Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI)—which we will consider in more detail in a moment—that are predominantly focused on developing a kind of philosophical expertise. Whether that makes the teaching of philosophy in prison more palatable (compared to the pedagogical alternatives) depends, of course, on whether we think such an expertise has value for the prisoners concerned.

I want to confront this issue by situating contemporary philosophy-based prison education initiatives in terms of a wider project that offers a virtue-theoretic conception of the goals of education. I suggest that this way of teaching philosophy is concerned with the cultivation of intellectual character, which is the subject’s stable set of integrated cognitive skills. In particular, I claim that this style of teaching philosophy in prisons cultivates intellectual character in the specific sense of developing a sub-class of the subject’s cognitive skills known as the intellectual virtues—i.e., it is devoted to developing virtuous intellectual character. I will be saying more about the intellectual virtues in due course, but one key point I will be making in this regard is that developing a subject’s intellectual virtues involves more than just developing their critical thinking capacities (though the two kinds of cognitive trait are closely related, as we will see). The wider conclusion that I will be arguing for is that on a virtue-theoretic conception of education, according to which education is geared towards the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character, it makes perfect sense to teach prisoners philosophy in the ways described. Indeed, while everyone would benefit from being taught philosophy on this model, there are reasons to think that it might be especially advantageous to prisoners.

**A CoPI-Based Philosophy in Prisons Project**

It will be useful for our purposes to consider a concrete philosophy-based prison education initiative. This was a collaboration between faculty from the University of Edin-
burgh—specifically philosophers from the Eidyn research centre which is based in the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, and faculty from the Moray House School of Education—and colleagues at the ‘chalk-face’ of prison education who at that time were working in this sector as part of a contract between New College Lanarkshire and the Scottish Prison Service. While the project has since been expanded to other prisons, in its initial phase (which will be our focus here) it was targeted on just two Scottish prisons, HMP Low Moss and HMP Cornton Vale, which house male and female prisoners, respectively. The project has been described in detail elsewhere (Pritchard, 2019), so here I will focus on those elements that are most relevant to our current concerns.

The teaching was centred around a weekly classroom discussion, with classes of around 7-8 students. This class size was chosen because it was large enough to create a lively discussion group, but also small enough to allow for full participation in the planned discussions. Each run of the course lasted for seven weeks. Each week the students were shown a video which covered a core area of philosophy. These videos were created from a highly successful MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) entitled ‘Introduction to Philosophy’ that the Eidyn research centre has been running since 2013 on the Coursera platform. This is designed to offer an accessible introduction to the main areas of philosophy and presupposes no background knowledge in the subject. The MOOC has been very popular, with millions of people taking the course worldwide. Since prisoners do not have access to the internet, it was necessary to specially create an off-line version of the lectures from this course. Each video covers a core area of philosophy, starting with topics that students are likely to have some familiarity with (such as ethics and political philosophy) before moving on to more abstract topics like epistemology (e.g., scepticism) and metaphysics (e.g., free will).

Each weekly discussion seminar was paired with a topic from the video that the students watched that week. These discussion seminars employed the CoPI methodology. This is a pedagogical approach to developing thinking and reasoning skills that is familiar from Philosophy for Children (P4C) programmes (Kennedy, 2012; Lipman, 1998). While CoPI is widely used in philosophy education projects aimed at children, it has also been found to be effective as a way of teaching philosophy at any educational level, particularly when the students concerned are encountering philosophy for the first time. The aim of the CoPI methodology is to create open, discursive environments that break the process of thinking down into its essential characteristics in order to make rational processes, ordinarily implicit, explicit to the protagonists, and thereby help students to develop critical judgement. CoPI-based discussions foster collaborative inquiries among the participants, encourage the clear articulation of ideas, and provide a structured opportunity for self-expression. This discursive environment is facilitated by the discussion leader creating an intellectual setting that puts the focus on reasons and reasoning. This is achieved via the implementation of ‘rules of play’, rather than aiming to cover specific kinds of philosophical content (though that may be covered as a means of stimulating discussion). CoPI is thus straightforwardly aligned with the sensibility, rather than the content, conception of teaching philosophy noted above.

For an example of these rules of play, students were not allowed to use their real name, but were required to create a fake name for the purpose of the discussion. This helped students to abstract away from their personal experience and focus on the reasons at issue. This is particularly important in a prison context, as the prison educators we worked with pointed out that it is difficult to prevent discussions from becoming forums for the students to discuss their lives (even when this is explicitly not the purpose of the discussion), and in particular

2 The version of CoPI that we employed was highly influenced by McCall (2009). See also Szifris (2016) for discussion of a philosophy in prisons project based around the CoPI methodology that was based at HMP Green.

3 CoPI is thus a form of ‘non-directive’ teaching’ in the sense articulated by Hand (2018, 37), such that the dialogues introduced and facilitated by the discussion leader have no particular persuasive aim. Teaching philosophy in the content sense, in contrast, would constitute ‘directive’ teaching.
the circumstances that led to them being in prison. Another key rule of play is that in order to enter a claim—make a move in this game of reasons, as it were—students had to make explicit their reasons for making their assertion, so that the reasoning itself can be brought forth for discussion by the group. Relatedly, in objecting to an assertion a student must be willing to state both the claim that is being objected to and also the reason offered for that claim. In this way the students become used to the idea both of explicitly formulating their reasons and of understanding the explicit formulation of reasons offered by others. Rules of play of this kind enable the educator, whose goal is merely to facilitate this discussion (rather than direct it, much less ‘teach’ the students), to focus the discussion on reasons, and thereby on what it is to engage in good reasoning. The discursive nature of the process means that the students learn together, in a social and collaborative environment that is receptive to each person’s contribution.

CoPI provides an ideal structure to discuss ideas in a philosophical manner, as the focus is not on a specific philosophical subject matter, much is it less designed to test student knowledge of that subject matter, but is rather concerned with developing ways of thinking critically. The CoPI pedagogical approach also has obvious advantages in a prison context, where one cannot assume anything about the academic background of the students, given the wide range of educational backgrounds of the prisoners. Moreover, as we’ve already noted, the strictly impersonal nature of this approach, whereby personal digressions are disallowed, is also useful in a prison setting, as it helps the students to avoid distractions and focus on the ideas in play.

The results of this project have been discussed at length elsewhere (Pritchard, 2019), but we can summarize the four main themes that are of particular relevance for our present purposes as follows. First, there was clear evidence of the students developing their critical reasoning capacities, such as the ability to articulate reasoning in support of their claims, to accurately represent the reasoning offered by others, and to articulate competing considerations in support of a claim (and thereby adjudicate between different positions in a debate). As one of the prison educators interviewed put it when asked what the prisoners gained from doing the CoPI seminars:

Critical thinking skills. They are developed in a lot of other subjects up to a point, but that’s the biggest transformation I’ve seen in the nearly five years that I’ve worked with prisoners in such a short space of time. […] I think their critical thinking and their way of listening and interacting with each other and actually how they articulate themselves changed dramatically. (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 256)

Second, students also developed related cognitive skills, such as a sensitivity to evidence and reasons, an ability to fairly examine ideas that are not their own, a willingness to change their mind in the face of argument, and a greater tendency to reflect on their beliefs where appropriate. Indeed, this was a recurring theme in the prisoners’ own descriptions of what they gained from the CoPI seminars. Here is one of the prisoners describing the effect of CoPI in this regard:

I think this course gives you more understanding, you learn how to manage things better, you learn how to look at things from all different points of view.

Whereas before you would just look at it from your own point of view, which

4 There are also obviously both practical and ethical reasons in a prison education context why it might be important to preserve the student’s anonymity.

5 A recent longitudinal study of prisoners in England and Wales—see Williams, Papadopoulou & Booth (2012)—makes startling reading in this regard (and in several other regards too). For example, it reports that an astonishing 63% of prisoners had been suspended or temporarily excluded from school, with 42% experiencing permanent exclusion. (For comparison, a recent report for the UK government—see Timpson (2019, 6)—notes that just 0.06% of schoolchildren nationwide were permanently excluded in the 2013/14 school year). A recent report on Scottish prisons specifically states that around 20% of prisoners had difficulties with writing, numbers, and reading (against a national average of around 3%). (Scottish Government Justice Directorate Report 2015, 6)
is quite selfish, you know. But, now you’re open to other ideas, so it makes your mind open to new issues that you wouldn’t think about so much. (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 257)

Third, students demonstrated greater intellectual respect for others, such as a willingness to carefully listen to what others are saying and then rationally engage with them. Several prisoners reported that the CoPI seminars gave them an insight into how they had previously been insufficiently attentive to what others were saying, but that engaging with the CoPI method helped them to change in this regard. For example:

I actually needed to learn how to listen and absorb information, also how to construct arguments properly and not just jump in and try and talk over people. This is a major issue of mine. It always has been. (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 258)

Finally, fourth, students displayed a greater degree of intellectual self-respect, in the sense that they put greater stock in their own opinions and in their cognitive capacities. Interestingly, this was especially so with regard to the female prisoners, who in general were described (by both themselves and by the teachers involved) as suffering from low self-esteem (both intellectually and otherwise). Here is how one female prisoner from HMP Cornton Vale described the results of taking this CoPI-based course:

[T]his course has actually given me a lot of confidence. To feel like your actual opinion does count and it’s okay to give your opinion, no matter whether you agree with other people or not. (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 258)

These four themes are all closely related, of course. For example, in developing critical thinking skills, it is unsurprising that one also enhances one’s cognitive skills more generally, or that one demonstrates a greater intellectual respect for others. Nonetheless, it is important to keep these themes distinct, since as we will see there are ways in which the development of one aspect of a student’s cognitive abilities might be achieved in isolation from the others. It is also notable that the students themselves recognized the value of the kinds of cognitive traits developed by CoPI, both in terms of how they are useful across a wide range of situations and in terms of how they are important to their own personal development. On the latter front, for example, here is one of the prisoners describing the cognitive skills they gained from participating in the CoPI tutorials:

[… the skills are not just useful in a CoPI [tutorial], these are skills that are useful when you’re back in the block, when you’re dealing with officers, when you’re having to go to ICMs [integrated case management meetings …]. They’re skills that are transferable to everything […]. I’ve actually found myself watching more news and things that are of interest and topics that are quite current, so you can do these sorts of things, maybe secretly practising it and no telling other people you’re practicing on them, you know what I mean? (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 257)

Education as the Cultivation of Intellectual Character

The CoPI methodology dovetails with a conception of the epistemic goals of education that has proved popular, both historically and in the contemporary literature. According to this proposal, the overarching goal of education, at least from a purely epistemic point of view, is the cultivation of intellectual character. As already noted, intellectual character here concerns the subject’s stable and integrated set of cognitive skills. This includes both innate cognitive faculties, like one’s perceptual or memorial skills, and also acquired cognitive capacities, such as arithmetical or observational skills that one has learnt through training.

When theorists describe the epistemic goal of education as being the cultivation of intellectual character, however, they are usually understanding intellectual character in a par-
ticular way, such that it specifically concerns the development of an especially sophisticated sub-set of the subject’s stable and integrated cognitive skills known as the intellectual virtues. That is, the overarching epistemic goal of education on this proposal is not so much the development of intellectual character simpliciter (which may not involve any specific development of the intellectual virtues), but rather virtuous intellectual character (which does essentially concern the development of the intellectual virtues). The intellectual virtues are admirable character traits like curiosity, intellectual humility, integrity, intellectual tenacity, conscientiousness, and intellectual courage (Battaly, 2014; Roberts & Wood, 2007; Zagzebski, 1996). These are acquired cognitive skills that involve a nuanced capacity for judgement across a broad range of application and which are accompanied by distinctive motivations (as we will see in a moment). As such, the intellectual virtues are clearly instrumentally valuable due to their practical utility. But they are also held to be of final (non-instrumental) value too, on account of how they enable one to flourish as a human being. Accordingly, while education might in addition serve all kinds of non-epistemic purposes, such as practical, ethical, or political aims, its epistemic goals are thought to be geared towards the development of a virtuous intellectual character on account of the special value (both practical and final) of the intellectual virtues (Baehr, 2016; Battaly, 2006; Byerly, 2019; Hyslop-Margison, 2003; MacAllister, 2012; Pritchard, 2013; 2015; 2018; 2020; Sockett, 2012; Watson, 2018).  

We can see the attraction of such a proposal by considering the alternatives. For example, perhaps the epistemic goal of education should be a particular kind of epistemic standing, such as having true beliefs or knowledge. One of the problems facing this kind of view, however, is that it seems to imply that many of our educational practices are somewhat redundant, at least from a purely epistemic perspective. If this is the epistemic goal of education, then why encourage students to think for themselves, or to be able to undertake their own inquiries? Why not instead simply drill them with the true beliefs or knowledge that you want them to have, and make sure that they passively accept what they are taught? The point is that education is not primarily about what one learns, but rather how one learns, and that means that what we are trying to cultivate through education is the good intellectual character to acquire epistemic goods like true belief or knowledge in the right kind of way. 

The CoPI method speaks directly to a characterization of the epistemic goal of education as the development of intellectual character because of its focus on thinking itself, and in particular how to think (and reason, and argue, etc.) well. The setting aside of the goal of learning facts about a subject matter—and anything else that is extraneous to the task in hand—is important to bringing the nature of thinking itself to the fore. So understood, CoPI is a way of teaching philosophy that is aligned with the sensibility conception that was outlined above, such that one is engaged in the philosophical practice of thinking about thinking as opposed to learning particular philosophical theses or arguments (though one might learn the latter while in pursuit of the former). While there are undoubtedly other ways of cultivating intellectual character, and thereby targeting the epistemic goal of education, pursuing philosophy on the sensibility conception as CoPI does is a particularly direct way of doing so.  

Thus far we have made a case for thinking that the epistemic goal of education is the de-
velopment of intellectual character, and that teaching philosophy on the sensibility conception via the CoPI methodology is an especially straightforward way of pursuing this goal. Interestingly, however, while it is plausible that CoPI is devoted to the cultivation of intellectual character, it isn’t obvious that it is concerned with the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character specifically (i.e., with the development of the intellectual virtues).

This point is particularly pressing for our purposes since the CoPI method is often explicitly characterized as being geared towards critical thinking, and while the skills involved in critical thinking often overlap with the intellectual virtues, they are not necessarily the same thing. The reason for this is that there is more to the intellectual virtues than just the cognitive capacities involved in critical thinking. There are various features of the intellectual virtues that are relevant in this regard, but one key feature is that the intellectual virtues have a distinctive motivational component that need not be associated with critical thinking capacities. In particular, to be intellectually virtuous is to be motivated towards intellectually good ends, which means to have an overarching desire for the truth and thus for accuracy. This is a more demanding requirement than is relevant for most other cognitive skills, including critical thinking skills, as usually the possession of a cognitive skill doesn’t require that the subject has this specific motivation (which is why the intellectual virtues are a distinctive kind of cognitive skill). In particular, cognitive skills, like skills more generally, can usually be successfully manifested with purely strategic motives, or indeed with no motives at all. In the case of critical thinking skills, for example, one might successfully employ them simply because one wishes to win an argument, or to look clever in front of one’s peers. The same is not true of the intellectual virtues, however. One might successfully act as if one is intellectually humble for purely strategic reasons, for example—perhaps because one thinks that others will be impressed as a result—but while what one is doing is undoubtedly skillful (it is hard to even appear intellectually humble after all), it is not the manifestation of intellectual humility, since that intellectual virtue is always accompanied with the appropriate motivational state.

There is a lively debate in the literature about whether thinking of the epistemic goals of education as being devoted to the cultivation of intellectual character should be cashed-out in terms of the development of the intellectual virtues or merely in terms of certain critical thinking capacities (Baehr, 2019; Carter, Kotzee & Siegel, 2019; Hitchcock, 2018; Huber & Kuncel, 2016; Hyslop-Margison, 2003; Siegel, 1988, 1997, 2017). I think it is clear that the CoPI methodology is primarily focused on the development of intellectual character in general, and that it at least develops intellectual character in the weak sense of enhancing students’ critical thinking capacities. But I want to suggest that what it actually does in practice is cultivate intellectual character in the strong sense of developing the intellectual virtues (and thus virtuous intellectual character).

Indeed, we can see this in the results of the case study noted above. The student prisoners who attended the CoPI seminars weren’t learning merely to employ critical thinking skills but were in addition acquiring the motivations that accompany the intellectual virtues. Being willing to change one’s mind in the face of the counter-evidence, or showing greater intellectual self-respect or respect for others, are cognitive traits that encompass more than just critical thinking capacities. This is because they essentially involve having an overarching desire for the truth that is associated with the intellectual virtues.

Moreover, it is not a mere side-effect of the CoPI methodology that it has this result. One could certainly teach critical thinking in a purely instrumental fashion, whereby one focuses on certain practical goods, like winning arguments or impressing one’s peers, and showing how reasoning in this manner might achieve those goals. But CoPI is precisely not instrumental in this way. It is rather focused on the nature of thinking itself, with all other concerns, including the practical utility of good reasoning, set to one side. It is this feature of the methodology that makes students aware of how the space of reasons functions independently of any practical merit this learning might generate, and in the process helps to develop in the students a delight
in reasoning itself, and thus in the truth, which is what reasoning aims for. The CoPI method is thus a way of bringing the epistemic goal of education right to the very fore of the educational enterprise. When viewed this way, it is no surprise that the employment of this method leads to the development of the intellectual virtues, and thus cultivates virtuous intellectual character.

**Cultivating Virtuous Intellectual Character in a Prison Setting**

With the foregoing in mind, let us return to our question of what purpose teaching philosophy in prisons serves. If by ‘philosophy’ here one means teaching prisoners about a body of philosophical knowledge—philosophical theories, arguments, the history of the subject, and so on—then nothing we’ve argued for here would show that there is any specific benefit to teaching that in prisons, as opposed to teaching history, say, or poetry. Any number of topics can be worth learning, with philosophy just one of many. Indeed, if the goal is just to train the prisoners up in a particular subject matter, then it might well make sense to focus on subjects that have more practical appeal, such as accountancy or electrical engineering.

It is not this content sense of teaching philosophy that is held to be of specific interest to prison education, however, but rather the sensibility conception of teaching philosophy that was articulated above, whereby one trains students to think about the nature of thinking itself. As we have seen, this is just what the CoPI method is all about. Moreover, we have also argued that this method helps to cultivate intellectual character in the strong sense of developing the intellectual virtues (i.e., and not just critical thinking capacities). In addition, we have contended that the development of intellectual character in just this manner is the overarching epistemic goal of education. By employing the CoPI method one is thus targeting that goal in a particularly straightforward fashion.

The foregoing only demonstrates the general utility of teaching the CoPI method, however, and not specifically the utility of employing it within prison education. Still, one might argue that conceiving of the teaching of philosophy in this fashion at least explains why philosophy in this sense might have a special role to play in prison education, in that it has a special role to play in any educational context. That said, I still think we can provide a further rationale for why teaching philosophy, via the employment of the CoPI method, might be especially relevant to prison education.

We’ve already noted one such consideration above, which is that CoPI doesn’t presuppose anything about the students’ academic background; indeed, it doesn’t even presuppose that the students can read and write. This is very important in the context of prison education, where there are students with a diverse range of educational backgrounds, including a high number of students who have a very limited experience of formal education.  

A further practical benefit of employing the CoPI method relates to the utility of the skills that it generates. While the intellectual virtues are held to be finally valuable, they are also practically useful skills to have as well (as are, for that matter, mere critical thinking skills). Indeed, they are by their nature highly transferable skills, which are useful to dealing with a wide range of challenges (whether intellectual, social, practical, and so on). In particular, possessing the intellectual virtues will help prisoners to acquire further expertise of a specifically practical nature, since the intellectual virtues help one to learn. Indeed, that CoPI generates such practically useful skills was also a theme in the results of the case study described above. This highlights the point that it is misleading to contrast the teaching of philosophy in this content sense to prisoners with teaching them practical skills, as if this is a zero-sum choice. We should rather view the teaching of philosophy as a way of enhancing the overall educational

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9 See endnote 5 for further details about the educational background of prisoners in the UK.

10 There’s a useful summary of the practical benefits of teaching for the intellectual virtues in Baehr (2015). See also Baehr (2021). For a helpful recent discussion of the extrinsic merits of teaching philosophy via the CoPI method specifically (i.e., teaching philosophy on the sensibility conception, as we have put it), see Gatley (2020). See also Trickey & Topping (2004), McCall (2009), and Gorard, Siddiqui & See (2017).
opportunities for prisoners. Relatedly, insofar as one holds that the teaching of practical skills to prisoners is vitally important for improving recidivism rates, then that needn’t count against the teaching of philosophy in prisons.

Beyond these practical advantages to teaching philosophy in prisons, there are other advantages whose value is not predominately instrumental. We’ve noted above that the virtues, and hence the intellectual virtues, are held to be finally (i.e., non-instrumentally) valuable in that they contribute to a life of flourishing. Clearly to be able to flourish as a person is valuable to anyone, but there might be specific reasons why we would want prisoners to flourish in this way. There was evidence of this in the case study noted above, where the cultivation of intellectually virtuous character was found by the prisoners to be empowering. This is obviously important for prisoners who often feel powerless, particularly from an intellectual point of view, in the sense that their opinions are not valued or listened to.\footnote{We’ve previously noted that this issue of empowerment was particularly evident in the case of the women’s prison that was part of the study described above. Powerlessness among prisoners, and how this affects their health, especially their mental health, has been widely explored in the empirical literature. For a recent study in a UK prison that looks at health outcomes in prisoners, including issues regarding mental health that are relevant to our current concerns, see De Viggiani (2007). For a recent discussion of the specific issue of powerlessness among prisoners, and the role of prison education in mitigating this, see Evans, Pelletier & Szkola (2018). See also Duguid (1988). The issue of powerlessness among prisoners is also related to a range of other issues, not least the way in which prison demands that prisoners adopt different identities in order to accommodate the prison regime. See, for example, Crewe et al (2014), Liebling & Williams (2018), and Warr (2019). (I am grateful to Kirstine Szifris for alerting me to relevant literature on this last topic).}

More generally, cultivating virtuous intellectual character helps one to both value oneself and also others, and this is also important in the context of prison education. In particular, it helps prisoners to handle social situations involving debate without this collapsing into hostility or conflict. This advantage was seen in the results from the case study, where the prisoners who completed the course displayed both an intellectual self-respect and an intellectual respect for others. Indeed, some of the prisoners themselves remarked on how this had changed their dealings with others, to the extent that they attributed their previous difficulties to a failure to properly communicate with others, which they saw rooted in their own inability to reason clearly or understand the reasoning employed by others.\footnote{Note that it is not being suggested that employing teaching philosophy in prisons via the CoPI method is the only way achieving this. For example, therapy could be used for a similar purpose. For example, Szifris (2016) argues that the CoPI method should be employed in prisons alongside therapy, where each is contributing to the success of the other (without being in competition with each other, due to the very different foci of philosophical and therapeutic dialogue).} Here, for example, is testimony from one of the prisoners:

I think a lot of the trouble I’ve been involved in in the past, especially violence, has been through misunderstanding, or being misunderstood has led to a lot of the violence including what I’m in for now […]. In CoPI, it’s good to hear people having different views, without actually feeling as if, well actually different from me, just because they believe or they have a different view on something, it doesn’t mean they disagree with what my views are. A lot of stuff and violence that I’ve been involved in in the past has been through misunderstanding, you know […]. (Quoted in Pritchard, 2019, p. 257)

Clearly such skills, while finally valuable, are also practically useful as well. In particular, if prisoners are to prosper outside of prison, then it is vital that they not only gain the practical skills that will ensure gainful employment, but also the social skills that enable them to properly relate to others. But that in turn requires the development of the relevant kinds of cognitive skills, and that is something that the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character speaks directly to.

**Concluding Remarks**

The foregoing offers an overarching rationale for the teaching of philosophy in prisons,
at least where this is construed in terms of the sensibility conception that involves the development of a distinctive kind of philosophical critical expertise. There is a sense in which philosophical training in this fashion—such as embodied in the CoPI pedagogical method found in some of the UK-based philosophy in prisons projects under consideration—is really just teaching in the broadest possible manner, in that it is directly targeted at the cultivation of the subject’s intellectual character, in the specific sense of their virtuous intellectual character. This is in keeping with a particular conception of the fundamental epistemic goal of education, whereby the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character generates goods for the subject that are not only instrumentally but also finally valuable, in that it helps them to flourish as persons. Moreover, we have argued that there are benefits, both instrumental and final, to teaching that enhances virtuous intellectual character in a specifically prison setting.¹³

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Exploring the Relationship Between Education and Rehabilitation in the Prison Context

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between education and rehabilitation within the prison context. It begins by exploring the concept of rehabilitation, examining if prison rehabilitation is possible or if it is what Pat Carlen describes as a “penal imaginary”. Drawing on this idea, it considers how rehabilitation may act as a way of legitimising imprisonment and whether rehabilitation is in fact damaging and criminogenic. It then moves to explore other models of rehabilitation and imprisonment that may offer a more person-centred approach. Section two of the article begins by discussing understandings of adult education. It examines conflicting interpretations of education, settling on an understanding that is underpinned by principles of freedom. It then moves to explore how adult education is practised and understood within the prison context. Finally, this article analyses the relationship between prison education and prison rehabilitation, considering what kinds of education and rehabilitation may be conducive to supporting the holistic development of the person in prison.

Keywords: prison education, rehabilitation, adult education

Introduction

In Ireland and Europe, education in prison is a human right. This right is enshrined in a variety of European and International documents including the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners which states that “all prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality” (United Nations, 1990). Section 28 of the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006) acknowledges the right of every person in prison to be provided with “access to educational programmes which are as comprehensive as possible and which meet their individual needs while taking into account their aspirations”, and, at a national level in Ireland, the Prison Rules 2007 (The Government of Ireland, 2007, p. 72) affirms that “a broad and flexible programme of education shall be provided in each prison to meet the needs of prisoners”. While these influential documents are crucial for the provision of education in prison, it is equally important to consider how these rights, therein, are interpreted and the consequences of such interpretations. Within Europe, there is a lack of consistency on how education is perceived and delivered and who is responsible for fulfilling this right (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; King, 2019). More worryingly, several authors have expressed concerns that in some instances prison education may be politically driven, defined by aims of recidivism and rehabilitation (Behan, 2014; Costelloe & Warner, 2008; O’Donnell & Cummins, 2014). While education may be conducive to supporting desistance and its capacity to aid the rehabilitation process is not a bad thing, such aims may be contrary to the philosophy of adult education as espoused by the Council of Europe’s 1990 report on Education in Prison, if the model of rehabilitation we are speaking about does not...
reflect a similar ethos. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to bring prison education and prison rehabilitation into conversation with one another, exploring where their respective theories, concepts and philosophies converge and diverge. While this article predominantly focuses on the Irish context, much of what is discussed is relevant to other jurisdictions. This article is broken into three sections. Section one will begin by exploring the concept of rehabilitation: examining its definition, how it may be used to legitimise imprisonment, analysing its damaging and criminogenic potential as well as examining more liberty-centred and humanistic models of rehabilitation and imprisonment. Section two will then move to explore understandings of adult and prison education and examine the capacity for education within the prison context. Finally, section three will juxtapose prison education and rehabilitation and examine the lessons that can be learned from their respective insights.

Rehabilitation

What is Rehabilitation?

Rehabilitation is a much-contested and ambiguous concept within the field of criminology and can be understood as both a process and an outcome (McNeill & Graham, 2020; Vanstone, 2020). Mathiesen (2006) tells us that the word itself is of French and Latin origin, with “the French re, which means ‘return’ or ‘repetition’, and the Latin habilis, which means ‘competent’” (p. 27), while Campbell (2010) defines rehabilitation as “the process of helping a person to readapt to society or to restore someone to a former position or rank” (p. 831). From the offset, both prove problematic if applied to criminal justice. The underlying assumption is that returning to, readapting to, or being restored to a prior social status is something that is both desirable and possible. However, Carlen (2013) maintains that this is often not the case. Imprisonment does not occur in a vacuum and the majority of people in prison come from the most impoverished sections of society (Smith et al., 2007). The experience of imprisonment often co-exists amongst factors such as educational disadvantage, health inequality, unemployment, addiction, family breakdown, and poverty, and people in prison tend to have little to which they can be advantageously habilitated (Carlen, 2013; Higgins & Bourke, 2017; IPRT, 2012). It therefore comes as little surprise that, where there are higher levels of income inequality, there are higher rates of imprisonment (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007). This corresponds to research by O’Donnell et al., (2007) who found that the most deprived areas in Ireland had 149.5 prisoners per 10,000 population in comparison to 6.3 per 10,000 in the least deprived areas. In Ireland, such inequality is a result of the widening income gap between the rich and the poor (Sweeney, 2019). Sweeney (2019) also suggests that higher levels of inequality tend to result in the unequal distribution of economic and social resources resulting in “less socially cohesive societies” (p. 6). This inequality is evident in our prison systems, both in Ireland and abroad, which tends to see a high proportion of individuals who have experienced mental health problems, homelessness, addiction, and educational disadvantage (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; IPRT, 2012). Within the Irish context, individuals who have come through the care system, as well as people from the Travelling Community, also remain over-represented in our prison institutions (Carr & Mayock, 2019; IPRT, 2014). The reasons for the above are complex, and these experiences tend to intersect. While such experiences should not be confused with cause and effect, it is evident that state failings which result in heavier policing and punishment of the poor as well as a lack of legitimate opportunities and adequate services, has been shown to increase a person’s likelihood of ending up in prison (Carr & Mayock, 2019; IPRT, 2012, 2014). All of this suggests that prisons act as recycling centres for the poor, reinforcing pre-existing disadvantage. Yet, the state, which fails “to respect, protect and fulfil human rights” (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2015, p. 7) seeks to legitimise imprisonment through aspirational aims of rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation as a Way of Legitimising Imprisonment
Sykes (1956) maintains that “few problems in modern criminology are more perplexing than the role of imprisonment in reforming the adult criminal” (p. 257). Yet, despite this, O’Donnell (2016) highlights that prison mission statements tend to be driven towards aims of rehabilitation. For example, the mission statement of the Irish Prison Service (2021) is to provide “safe and secure custody, dignity of care and rehabilitation to prisoners for safer communities” while the Northern Irish Prison Service (n.d.) state that their overall aim “is to improve public safety by reducing the risk of re-offending through the management and rehabilitation of offenders in custody”. We now must consider how such aims may work to legitimise imprisonment by aspiring to achieve ‘safer communities’ and ‘public safety’ through rehabilitation.

While public safety is a worthwhile goal, McNeill (2009) brings our attention to its potential pitfalls. In promising to protect the public we are confirming that a threat exists and in doing so instil and justify fear (McNeill, 2009). This helps to maintain an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality leading people to believe that prison is necessary to combat such risks. When prisons promise to ‘crackdown on crime’ through rehabilitation programmes, the goal is not to support the person in prison but rather to meet societal and political pressures (Mathiesen, 2006). Yet, a blind eye is often turned to such endeavours, and we are led to believe that rehabilitation programmes that target criminogenic risks, while ignoring the wider social and political causes of crime, can act as a “magic bullet” solution (Carlen, 2004, p. 260). In doing so, prison is not only legitimised by its rehabilitative ideology, but it serves to divert our attention away from the wider causes of crime that occur beyond the prison walls. Such approaches may help to ease society’s conscience, however, by placing society’s needs and desires ahead of those in prison we are only serving to ostracise and alienate people in prison further. The consequence of which often results in people leaving prison more damaged than when they went in (Costelloe, 2014; Muñoz, 2009).

Prison Rehabilitation as Damaging and Criminogenic?

It seems ironic that rehabilitation remains a key aim of imprisonment despite the abundance of research indicating that prison is inherently damaging and criminogenic (Mathiesen, 2006; O’Donnell, 2016). According to Ryan & Sim (2016), the prison is a place of subordination, rather than rehabilitation, and tends to be characterised by violence, intimidation and trauma. Gresham Sykes (2007) who coined the phrase ‘pains of imprisonment’ describes how the five pains caused by imprisonment (i.e. loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security) lead to the destruction of the individual’s sense of belonging and self-worth.

O’Donnell (2016) attempts to formulate a definition for the aim of imprisonment that challenges false ideals, such as rehabilitation, stating that, “the aim of imprisonment is to reconstitute the prisoner’s spatiotemporal world without causing avoidable collateral damage” (p. 39). In a time when rehabilitation places such emphasis on ‘what works?’, we are forced to consider “what hurts?” (Liebling & Maruna, 2005, p. 20). While it is wholeheartedly acknowledged that there are many forms of rehabilitative practices that are doing tremendous work, it is argued that rehabilitative practices that ignore the wider social and cultural context of crime have the potential to do more harm than good. Such efforts are often referred to as “personal rehabilitation” (McNeill & Graham, 2020, p. 1) or the “correctional model of rehabilitation” (Robinson & Raynor, 2006, p. 336) and are arguably the most commonly implemented and understood models of rehabilitation. These models tend to adopt a top-down, medicalised and deficit based approach, and can result in what Crewe (2011) has coined as tightness, depth and weight.

The metaphors of tightness, depth, and weight are used to explain the ever present, but invisible, penal control that grips those within the prison walls (Crewe, 2011; Crewe & Ievins, 2021). Influenced by Sykes, Crewe (2011, p. 509) uses “the pains of indeterminacy, the pains of psychological assessment and the pains of self-government” to analyse the harmful effects of
imprisonment on the psyche. The pains of indeterminacy refer to the lack of certainty and consistency within the prison regime. The prison is a “world where arbitrariness rules, the bureaucracy where logic takes an implacable form but makes little sense” (O’Donnell, 2015, p. 37) and where changes can happen “with the stroke of a pen” (Crewe, 2011, p. 518). Crewe (2011) identified the “fog of uncertainty” that people on indeterminate sentences faced concerning their sentence management and requirements for release (p. 514). The lack of clarity around how decisions were made and what was required led to feelings of confusion and insecurity, as was evident from Carter (cited in Crewe, 2011, p. 514):

I went for the R and R course and they asked me all these questions and they said, ‘well, you haven’t got enough defects to do the course, we don’t feel that you’ll benefit from it’. They said to me, ‘that’s as good as a pass.’ [But] my parole papers come back and it says ‘you haven’t done enough courses’.

The above statement highlights the bureaucracy and box ticking that is evidently present within the rehabilitation process. It also highlights how decisions are made with a lack of reason and rationale, and with little to no consideration of the consequences for those in prison.

The pains of psychological assessment are another very real pain of the rehabilitation process. Crewe (2011) uses this term to describe the invasion and control of psychological assessments that strip a person of their identity categorising them into labels of risk or psychological assessment. Such an approach is dehumanising and oppressive. However, psychological assessments carry weight and there is often little choice but to tolerate it even if it contradicts one’s self-perceptions (Crewe, 2011). In Ireland, clinical and actuarial risk assessments are provided to the Parole Board by The Probation Service and The Psychology Service to determine if those serving life sentences are suitable for release (Griffin & Healy, 2019). These methods reduce a person to appropriate risk categories, ignoring the subjectivity of the individual. Clinical assessments require “carving up complex identities into abstract units to meet the requirements of the ‘information system’” (Crewe, 2011, p. 515), while actuarial methods are a calculated prediction of the risk of offending based on specific predictors, for example, age, gender, and substance use (American Psychological Association, 2020). Crewe (2011) identifies several problems with such methods, stating that they fail to capture the multidimensional and subjective nature of the person in prison. It is also interesting to note that the social context of the individual, which is continuously ignored by such a rehabilitative endeavour, only appears to be relevant in terms of its criminogenic risk.

The pains of psychological assessment can also be understood in relation to “coerced correction” (McNeill, 2012, p. 6). Crewe (2009) describes how Prison Service psychologists expressed their concerns over the volume of ideologically driven rehabilitation programmes with unrealistic expectations. Such courses tend to offer little scope for personal reflection and while they may not be deemed mandatory, failure to participate can be viewed as an act of non-compliance (Crewe, 2009). Coercing individuals into partaking in such individualised programmes can serve to further alienate those in prison, reducing them to mere objects of control.

The final pain described by Crewe (2011) is the pain of self-government. This pain refers to the invisible but ever-present panoptic gaze that regulates and monitors the prison population. Crewe (2011) identifies how a physical presence is not necessary to cause pain. The use of incentivised regimes, drug testing, and psychological assessments means that constant surveillance is no longer necessary for control. Those in prison are at the mercy of the institution in ways that allegedly hands back freedom and control of sentence management. However, Crewe (2011) maintains that this freedom is an illusion only serving to enhance compliance. If you want to get out of prison it is no longer sufficient to merely ‘keep the head down’, individuals must be seen to be taking responsibility if they want to progress, for “when push comes to shove, they’re the ones that do your reports” (Isaac, cited in Crewe, 2011, p. 519)
As mentioned, rehabilitation is a complex concept and can mean very different things within different contexts. So far, this article has explored more traditional authoritarian understandings of rehabilitation that tend to adopt a top-down approach premised on risk and crime reduction. However, it is also accepted that other forms of rehabilitation, which recognise the person in prison as a social being, exist. One such example is the “humanistic and liberty-centred” model proposed by Rotman (1986, pp. 1025-1026). Unlike rehabilitation efforts mentioned previously, this “anthropocentric” approach is not underpinned by disciplinary objectives but rather prioritises the rights and needs of the person in prison (Rotman, 1986, p. 1026). The rights-based model values what it means to be inside prison, as well as preparing the person for life on release. This is an important departure from the types of rehabilitation previously discussed which tend to fixate on lowering recidivism rates and social control. As stated in the Whitaker Report (1985), rehabilitation programmes should not be legitimised by their ability to rehabilitate and reduce reoffending, instead, a rights-based approach acknowledges the links between social deprivation and crime and draws attention to the state’s obligation to provide rehabilitation (Robinson, 2008). Such efforts should aim to mitigate the damage caused by imprisonment and help to ensure that the person is no worse off than when they were committed (Rotman, 1986).

Concepts of freedom and trust are central to a rights-based model of rehabilitation. Rotman (1986) dismisses rehabilitation efforts that individualise responsibility and impose treatments that fail to recognise the person as a human and relational being. The Whitaker Report (1985) emphasises the importance of choice in the rehabilitative endeavour and calls for supports and services that are “facilitative, not coercive” (p. 92). This view is similarly supported by the Council of Europe (1990) which states that “genuine rehabilitation…can only take place in a context of freedom of choice, where they can explore their feelings and experiences, and can define for themselves ‘where they are at’” (p. 42). Rotman (1986) proposes that, through voluntary dialogue and self-reflection, rehabilitation can help to nurture a sense of social responsibility and enable the person to recognise their place in the world. However, in an environment that often decimates the individual’s sense of societal belonging, it is challenging to see how such an awakening can be realised. This sentiment is similarly expressed by Auty & Liebling (2020) who highlight the importance of prison dynamics in the rehabilitative process. It is therefore important to consider how a prison environment that is conducive to rehabilitation can be achieved.

Just as there is not one type of rehabilitation, so too is there not just one type of prison. While this article does not offer the scope to provide an in-depth analysis of the various types of penal systems, it does seek to provide an insight into what kinds of prisons may help to support rehabilitation. In doing so it is accepted that prisons differ in terms of relationships, architecture, ethos, and purpose, all of which matter in how imprisonment, and indeed rehabilitation, is experienced (Liebling, 2020). According to Liebling (2020), it is the moral climate, or the interpersonal relationships and treatment of people in prison that matters most. Liebling (2020) states that long-term change and positive outcomes are best supported in prisons where “staff professionalism, humanity, help and assistance, and clarity and organisation are higher” (p. 197). In particular, Liebling (2020) emphasises the importance of prison officers, which carry out the dual role of custodian and carer, in supporting a rehabilitative regime, a view that is also expressed in the Whitaker Report (1985).

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of a more humane and potentially rehabilitative penal system can be seen in what is often coined as “Scandinavian exceptionalism” (Pratt, 2008, p. 119). While this term has stirred considerable debate, particularly amongst Nordic researchers (Todd-Kvam & Ugelvik, 2020) lessons can be learned from what Pratt (2008) describes as a more humane and welfare orientated prison system. This view is supported by Warner (2021) who found the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland and Norway to have resisted
the same “punitive turn” as their Anglo-American counterparts (Warner, 2021). While there were some varying findings within the different jurisdictions Warner (2021) concludes that:

Nordic countries have remained very restrained in their use of imprisonment, have adhered to high standards of humanity and human rights in the way people are treated in prison, and have largely maintained socially-inclusive approaches in responding to those who commit crime. (p. 127)

Warner (2021) uses three criteria to explore the levels of punitiveness within the Nordic system. These are: the scale of imprisonment, the depth, or quality of imprisonment, and the perception of the person in prison. Using these criteria, he highlights areas of good practice within the Nordic system including the use of open prisons, smaller prisons with lower population sizes, significant out-of-cell time (12-14 hours), higher use of single-cell accommodation, and appropriate sanitation facilities. The Nordic systems also placed an emphasis on human rights, with people in prison regarded as citizens. It was acknowledged that many of those in prison were there due to wider social and structural circumstances and consequently it was recognized that prison should be viewed as a last resort. These findings put forward by Warner (2021) echo much of what is suggested in the Whitaker Report (1985) and provide an example of how prison regimes can reconcile care and custody and resist severe punitive measures that may only serve to damage the person in prison and hinder the rehabilitative process.

Adult and Prison Education

Exploring Adult Education

As with rehabilitation, there are many ways of understanding and experiencing adult education. In its Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education, UNESCO (2003) makes a good attempt at providing a broad and all-encompassing definition for adult education, describing it as:

The entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behaviour in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development.

Here adult education is described as something that can be both formal and informal, an add on or a catch-up, aimed at achieving qualifications, or simply education for education’s sake. UNESCO (2003) goes on to describe associated aims and principles of adult education which acknowledge the importance of the social and cultural context of the adult student, emphasising the importance of social justice, respect, diversity, relationships, critical thinking, cultural appreciation, the lived experience, personal and social development, active participation, and social responsibility. Arguably, what is most significant is its statement that adult education “should recognize that every adult, by virtue of his or her experience of life, is the vehicle of a culture which enables him or her to play the role of both learner and teacher in the educational process in which he or she participates”. In this way UNESCO’s (2003) explanation of adult education moves beyond what Freire (2017) describes at the “banking concept of education”, reconciling the “student-teacher contradiction”, and in doing so acknowledges the value of a holistic approach that is open to uncertainty, experimentation and freedom (p. 45).

When speaking of education, it is imperative to consider what it means to speak of education educationally (Biesta, 2020). Biesta & Säfström (2011) state that “to speak for education in an educational manner means to express an interest in freedom, and more specifically,
an interest in the freedom of the other; the freedom of the child, the freedom of the pupil, the freedom of the student” (p. 540). If education is to be the practice of freedom, then education must be a reciprocal and participatory process for both the student and the teacher (Freire, 2017; hooks, 1994). It should recognise learners as “whole beings with complex lives” and not simply “seekers after compartmentalised bits of knowledge” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Engagement must be genuine and voluntary with Brookfield & Holst (2011) describing compulsory adult education as an “oxymoron” (p. 20). Emancipatory education rejects a prescribed curriculum and instead encourages teachers and students to engage in the co-creation of knowledge (Freire, 2017; hooks, 1994; Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Lindeman (cited in Knowles et al., 2012, p. 38) expresses a similar view stating that the knowledge and experience of the teacher and student are “exchangeable at par”. If this does not happen Lindeman (1945) warns us that students will simply not engage. Thus, liberatory adult education requires the teacher to be both humble and brave. Freedom requires an openness to unpredictability and uncertainty, and educators must be willing to unleash control as well as eliminating certainties about what this freedom might look like (Todd, 2011).

Jarvis (2010) raises concerns about current attitudes that prioritise adult education for work and not the personal development of the student. While employment is a worthwhile endeavour of adult education, it should not be its sole purpose. Valuing adult education primarily as an instrument for economic gain (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Knowles et al., 2012) serves to reinforce social inequalities and instil ideologies of individualism and competition (Kromydas, 2017). When we reduce our understanding of education to a function of society we limit its possibilities (Sidorkin, 2011). Instead, adult education is a collective endeavour that should seek to create a consciousness-raising, dialogical space where widely held ideologies can be critically explored (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Brookfield (2001) defines ideologies as “broadly accepted sets of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appear self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace, but that actually work to maintain an unjust social and political order” (p. 14). Thus, adult education is education “for use” (Lindeman, 1944, p. 116) and aims to interrupt such ideologies. However, this is not always a simple process, with Mezirow (1994) reminding us of our deep-seated resistance to change. Consequently, adult education is a “daring challenge” (Lindeman, 1944, p. 116) and if this challenge is to be accepted we must ensure that it draws on and offers meaning to the learners lives (Mezirow, 1994). This may be possible if we do what Lindeman (1944) suggests and use the past to interrogate the present. Such a perspective will help us to discover how we got to our current state of being. In this way it is future-orientated (Lindeman, 1944) with these insights revealing, as well as forcing us to confront, taken for granted assumptions that reinforce inequality and privilege, enabling us to strive for a more inclusive and just future.

**Adult Education in the Prison Context**

The Council of Europe (1990) states that prison education should adopt an adult education philosophy. Whilst prison education is not necessarily a panacea for the damaging effects of prison (Muñoz, 2009), an adult education approach can help to alleviate the “abnormal situation of imprisonment” (Council of Europe, 1990, p. 13). Acknowledging this, The Council of Europe (1990) emphasises the importance of drawing on life experiences and the promotion of active participation by learners. Education offered in prison must be experiential, participatory, and not “suffering from narration sickness” (Freire, 2017, p. 45). Offering this type of education can be transformative and can help to facilitate a change in the learner’s perceptions of self, others, and the world. This view is supported by Costelloe & Warner (2014) who contend that offering prison education based on an adult education philosophy can help to promote critical and creative thinking, leading to the holistic development of the person. If this is to happen, it is crucial that prison education is person and not prisoner focused.
Imprisonment is the manifestation of control, while adult education can be understood as the practice of freedom. Such a disparity makes it difficult to conceive how genuine adult education is possible within the constraints of the prison. Offering education in prison is “inherently complex” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 5). Prison is intrinsically damaging - depersonalising, institutionalising and desocialising the individual. For education to operate in such an oppressive environment creates challenges for prison teachers and students (Muñoz, 2009). O’Donnell & Cummins (2014) highlight the challenges that prison teachers face in maintaining their professional integrity while not succumbing to the coercive and controlling aims of the prison establishment. For this to be possible prison education “must respect the integrity and freedom of choice of the student” (Council of Europe, 1990. p. 13). This freedom should not be restricted to the choice to participate but relates to the freedom of expression, the freedom to critically think, the freedom to interact, the freedom to participate and the freedom to speak freely (Council of Europe, 1990; O’Donnell & Cummins, 2014). While the prison is often premised on risk and control, an adult education ethos fosters past, present, and future potential, providing a space where autonomy is welcomed and encouraged.

Prison education should be a process that is relevant to life inside and outside of the prison regime (Costelloe, 2014; O’Donnell & Cummins, 2014). For this to be possible, the Council of Europe (1990) recommends that people in prison are provided with a broad, diverse, and flexible curriculum that takes into consideration their knowledge, skills, and experiences as well as their social and cultural context. Education should look beyond traditional forms of teaching and learning, often limited by outcomes and outputs, and embrace experimentation, critique and reflection. One such way this might be possible is through the creative arts. This was highlighted by a participant in O’Donnell’s (2012, p. 13) review of the NCAD Art Programme in Portlaoise Prison, Ireland, who stated:

I think you were giving them the keys to the door to their own personal space. It doesn’t matter if you can’t leave the cell. When you create art, it is an unlimited world, it is massive. Especially if you are there for a long time. You have given the keys to this magical place. When you are painting, you are gone, you are out of there. That is probably the most subversive and dangerous thing about it; there is no control.

The above reflection alludes to the freedom of education. Although the door may be locked, the mind is free. Education acts as a form of escape. It enables the person to escape the “daily drudge” (Behan, 2014, p. 23) of the prison routine and allows the person to shed their prison identity and become a student.

The Relationship Between Education and Rehabilitation

Prison Education and Rehabilitation: Mutually Exclusive or Mutually Compatible?

So far, we have explored rehabilitation and education as individual concepts, examining their definitions as well as exploring how they operate inside and outside the prison walls. This section will now explore how these concepts relate to each other within the prison context.

While an emancipatory adult education ethos acknowledges the person as an expert in their own life, this approach is often contrary to traditional models of rehabilitation. As previously mentioned, a correctional model of rehabilitation tends to adopt a top-down approach, which places the rehabilitation practitioner as the expert, to whom the person in prison must listen and learn. A participant in Crewe’s (2009) research affirmed the problematic nature of this stating:

If you want to make an impact on people’s lives you need to talk to them about what they need and they want…An awful lot of the people in the general prison population are people who have been assaulted by society and have been alienated from it…I would say if you want to redress that, rehabilitate…Find
out where they are at. What has been missing. Why the system has failed…

From this statement, it is clear that if rehabilitation is to become possible practitioners must reject a medicalised approach where the “expert” prescribes treatment for individual deficiencies. Instead, they must come to know the person under their care as a social being and develop a person-centred, humanistic approach as espoused by Rotman (1986) and the Whitaker Report (1985). Problems of imprisonment will not be solved until practitioners look beyond what they think is needed and instead ask what is needed (Lyon, 2014). While education and rehabilitation may be seen as two separate endeavours, both can take insight and inspiration from principles of dialogue, humanisation and the lived experience as embraced by educationalists and criminologists alike who advocate for such values in their relevant disciplines (Freire, 2017; hooks, 1994; Lindeman, 1944; Maruna, 2012; Mezirow, 1994; Rotman, 1986; Whitaker Report, 1985). Such insights may help to break down barriers and contradictions and allow for pathways beyond prison to be realised.

While authoritative forms of rehabilitation often focus on fixing the person and/or making them ‘fit back in’, liberty-centred models of adult education and rehabilitation provides the person in prison with the opportunity to express themselves, to question and to disagree. This emancipatory approach encourages the individual to consider the “bigger picture of the structures that shape both the square peg and the round hole” (McNeill, 2017). This process can be compared to what Freire (2017, p. 142) describes as the “unveiling of the world and of themselves”. Both models strive to eradicate taken-for-granted assumptions, encourage critical reflection, thus creating opportunities for the person to “re-conceptualise their place in society” (Costelloe, 2014, p. 30). A similar analysis is presented by Behan (2014, p. 21) who states that an adult education approach and an anthropocentric model of rehabilitation “do not over emphasise or pathologize individual activity but seek to understand actions in wider social, political and economic contexts”. Furthermore, both models acknowledge the importance of individual choice, emphasising the paradoxical and pathologizing nature of coercing the person in prison to engage in education or rehabilitation.

Recommendation 3 of the Council of Europe Recommendations on Prison Education, arguably underpins all 17 and 18 recommendations in both the Council of Europe’s (1990) document and King’s (2019) review. Recommendation 3 states that “education in prison shall aim to develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context”. This recognition of the whole person is crucial. It acknowledges the person in prison, first and foremost, as a human being, as well as acknowledging the array of identities each person may hold in society, such as student, father, son, mother, daughter, as well as a citizen with rights and needs. This is contrary to correctional rehabilitation narratives which tend to perceive the person in prison as a broken human, with one identity – namely, criminal; whose status as a citizen with rights and needs is questioned as a result of their incarceration (Crewe, 2011). Maruna & LeBel (2012, p. 76) highlight how such identities can lead to a Pygmalion effect and instead suggest that people are more likely to change their lives for the better when those around them believe in them and recognise their capacity to change. Such a view is affirmed by Rotman (1986, p. 1026) who states that “the humanistic model of rehabilitation affirms the concept of prison inmates as possessors of rights” which in turn “generates feeling of self-worth…and favours the possibility of self-command and responsible action within society”. Thus, when we stop viewing the person in prison through a deficit lens and instead recognise their humanity and citizenship, change can become possible. This view is further emphasized by Carlen (2013) who states that people in prison respond better to supports provided by staff who recognize them as citizens with rights and not ‘offenders’ and ‘future risks’.

Evidence of a humanistic approach can also be found within prison education. In research carried out by Carrigan (2013, p. 239), we hear the narratives of eighteen adult learners from the Irish education units of Mountjoy Prison, St. Patrick’s Institution and Limerick Prison. In this research, one student stated:
At the end of the day when you come up here they don’t treat you like you’re a prisoner. They just treat you like you’re normal…I get treated with respect when I come up here so. You’re not treated like a child; you get treated like an adult.

What is crucial about this quote is that, within the prison’s education unit, imprisonment does not define the person. It is a place where students are empowered to feel “normal”, respected and “like an adult”, a place where the person’s potential is recognised and harnessed. The impact of such an approach was noted by Crewe (2009) and Behan (2014) who found that people in prison described the education unit as being distinct from the prison. This is in keeping with the Council of Europe’s *Education in Prison* (1990, p. 18) which states that prison educators should:

See those in their classes as adults involved in normal adult education activities… the past criminal behaviour of the students should be kept in the background, so that the normal atmosphere, interactions, and processes of adult education can flourish.

Education in prison is not a means to an end, but an end in itself (Costelloe, 2014). Education recognises the power of the process. Adult education is not solely valued in terms of its outcomes and outputs, but rather in terms of its transformative and emancipatory potential. Costelloe & Warner (2014, p. 238) tell us that “the way prison education is conceived and how the person in prison is perceived are two sides of the same coin”. This article suggests that this statement can be further extended to rehabilitation, and it could be said that: the way prison rehabilitation is conceived and how the person is perceived are two sides of the same coin. Consequently, education and rehabilitation efforts may be seen as compatible endeavours when they adopt an approach that prioritises the person and not the ‘offender’.

**Lessons to be Learned from Liberty-Centred Models of Education and Rehabilitation**

The above analysis has explored distinctions and similarities between prison education and rehabilitation. It is often claimed that the purpose of education in prison is to promote rehabilitation and reduce reoffending (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Warner, 2007) however, as this article demonstrates, it is imperative that we consider what type of rehabilitation we are talking about when considering such a claim. Although the benefits of reducing reoffending, for both society and the person in prison, cannot be argued, it should not be deemed as the sole objective of prison education or rehabilitation (Mulcahy, 2018; Rotman, 1986; Warner, 2007). Warner (2007) contends that justifying prison education by placing prominence on reoffending and recidivism rates is a narrow perspective. While Rotman (1986) expresses a similar sentiment in relation to rehabilitation. As discussed, prison, and certain forms of rehabilitation, are criminogenic and to justify the impact and value of prison education and rehabilitation against reoffending rates is naïve and does not take into consideration the many pains of imprisonment. A view which is echoed within the Whitaker Report (1985, p. 90) which identifies the prison as the “greatest single obstacle to the personal development of prisoners, and to reducing the conviction rate”.

Prison education is often legitimised by its rehabilitative potential and the never-ending obsession with ‘what works’ continues to play a key role in how prison education is valued (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; Duguid, 2000). Research conducted by Duguid et al. (1998), which sought to measure the transformative potential of education using rates of recidivism, emphasised the complexity of the individual. They affirmed that while it may be possible to say that education could improve post release chances, such chances are also influenced by the individual’s social and cultural contexts as well as their pre and post release experiences (Duguid et al., 1998). This analysis is crucial. Yet, just as correctional rehabilitation efforts tend to ignore the complexities surrounding imprisonment and reintegration, so too does it ignore such complexities when assessing ‘what works’ (Duguid, 2000). Duguid (2000, p. 60) ascertains
that “the most obvious lesson we can learn is that theories do not have to be true or even reasonably true to be powerful”. This is important. Education and rehabilitation are often placed as competing endeavours (Duguid, 2000). When correctional rehabilitation validates its legitimacy based on low recidivism rates, it may cause prison authorities to question the value of prison education and indeed other, more holistic forms, of rehabilitation. Evidence of this was highlighted by Duguid (2000, p. 59) when the prison education programme he was involved in was “done in” by a more cost and time effective cognitive skills programme which promised to diagnose deficits and prescribe individual treatment. Despite the lack of substantial evidence, prison authorities were allured by its aim to tackle criminogenic risk and the capacity for such programmes to be delivered by prison staff. Ironically, it was later found that this cognitive programme was ineffective in reducing reoffending (Duguid, 2000). Yet the damage had been done and resulted in offence-focused programmes, which served to reduce the person to their criminogenic risk, to take influence in Canada and wider Europe (Costelloe & Warner, 2014).

There are many lessons to be learned from the above experience. Perhaps what is most crucial, and has been consistently addressed throughout this article, is the need to view the individual in prison as a citizen with rights and needs, a person with strengths and weaknesses, and a human being with multiple identities. A person’s imprisonment should not define them. Labels such as ‘felon’, ‘offender’, ‘convict’, ‘criminal’, and ‘prisoner’ have the potential to further damage and ostracise those in prison. If prison education and rehabilitation focus on labels of criminality and aims of reoffending, there is the danger that the holistic benefits of both will be lost. In doing so, the potential for authentic transformation and change may become impossible (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). Prison education and rehabilitation should not be valued solely on their potential to reduce criminogenic risk and reoffending. Instead, we must recognise their potential, both outside and inside the prison, as processes that have the potential to enable the person in prison to realise their potential, interrogate their place in the world and experience freedom.

**Conclusion**

There remains no consensus of how education and rehabilitation should be experienced and practised within the prison institution. As discussed in this article, many theorists in both education and criminology provide us with different roles and purposes of each endeavour. In the introduction of this article, it was stated that education is enshrined as a human right at an international, European and national level, for example in the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners (United Nations, 1990), the European Prison Rules (Council of Europe, 2006), and the Prison Rules 2007 (The Government of Ireland). However, while these documents also refer both directly (i.e., the European Prison Rules and the Prison Rules 2007) and indirectly (i.e., the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners) to rehabilitation, the ambiguity and lack of consensus of what is meant by rehabilitation undermines its efforts and can have damaging consequences for people in prison. Just as Behan (2021) emphasises that prison education is a right and not a privilege, the same can be said for rehabilitation. With this in mind, neither education nor rehabilitation should be co-opted into aims ascribed by punitive penal policies and must adopt an approach that is parallel to that of liberatory models of adult education (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Freire, 2017; hooks, 1994; Knowles et al., 2012; Lindeman, 1944) and person-centred models of rehabilitation (Mulcahy, 2018; Rotman, 1986; Whitaker Report, 1985). Such models embody principles of freedom, humanisation and the lived experience and have the potential to limit the pains of imprisonment and allow the person in prison to realise a more positive future.

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Trust, Power, and Transformation in the Prison Classroom

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Abstract: This article does three things. First, it asks a new question about transformative education, namely ‘what is the role of power and trust in the decision of whether to transform one’s meaning scheme in the face of new information or whether to simply reject the new information?’ Secondly, it develops a five-stage model which elaborates on the role of this decision in transformative learning. Finally, it uses grounded-theory and the five-stage model to argue that power and trust play an important role in facilitating transformative learning.

Keywords: transformative learning, prison education, transformative experience, meaning schemes, power, trust, student resistance, pushback, empowerment.
of what I call the ‘decision point’ in transformative learning - the point at which the student decides whether to rationalize away incongruous data or else accept a new meaning scheme - and ii) explores the impact of trust and power on the student’s decision.

**Literature Review**

In this section, I canvas the views of some of the important figures in the transformative learning literature and draw out the themes of trust and power as they arise in research lying at the intersection of transformative learning and prison education. This forms the backdrop for my own research and supports the findings that I present later.

**Transformative Learning**

On Jack Mezirow’s model, transformative learning occurs when, through exposure to new ideas, theories, behaviour etc., students experience a profound shift in their presuppositions and paradigms of thinking (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1995). Through transformative learning, students critically reflect on how they assess and interpret the world, question these methods and assumptions, then reject or revise them in light of new information.

When we receive any type of information from the outside world, we interpret and understand it via ‘meaning schemes’ made up of various smaller components such as individual beliefs, values, emotional responses, and pieces of knowledge (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 5-6) as well as general world views, theories, presuppositions, and goal orientations (Mezirow, 1990, p. 44). When I receive a new piece of information (say that I got an A on my recent math test), I assess and interpret that piece of information against my meaning scheme which tells me how to interpret that information. If my meaning scheme tells me that I am hopelessly bad at math and could never ace a math test, then I am likely to assess my A-grade with suspicion, as evidence that the test was too easy rather than as evidence of my mathematical ability. The notion of ‘meaning schemes’ is similar to the Kuhnian notion of ‘scientific paradigms’ - sets of implicit practices, rules, and assumptions that guide and dictate what makes for good scientific practice (Kuhn, 1962; Kitchenham, 2008, pp. 105-107).

In ordinary cases of learning, new information is assimilated into an existing meaning scheme. Transformative learning is different. It occurs when the new information forces a change in my current meaning scheme. I might initially interpret my A-grade as evidence that the test was easy, but after taking many tests and doing well, I may be forced to adjust my meaning scheme since it is no longer rational to interpret that data as evidence of the test being easy. Rather, the data forces me to adopt a meaning scheme which allows for my being good at math: I have undergone transformative learning. Transformation of this kind is similar to (and influenced by) Kuhn’s ‘revolutionary science.’ While normal periods of science see us assimilating new data into existing paradigms, occasionally some new data is gathered which is so radically incommensurable with the existing paradigm that that paradigm must be thrown out and a new one built. In these cases, a paradigm-shift happens, and we enter ‘revolutionary science.’

Transformative learning can occur in any number of different situations given the right conditions and any type of belief can cause transformation in the right context. There is, however, a general structure to the way transformative learning plays out (Mezirow, 1995 p. 50). First, the student experiences a disorienting dilemma which leads them to critically assess their epistemic and sociocultural assumptions to try to resolve the dilemma. When this proves impossible, and when they recognize that others have been through a similar experience, they

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5 The literature on transformative learning has ties with the more recent philosophical literature on transformative experience (for example Paul, 2014; Carel & Kidd, 2020).
6 These are also called ‘reference frames’ or ‘meaning structures’ by Mezirow, and ‘paradigms’ by Kuhn. I use the term ‘meaning schemes’ exclusively for consistency.
7 Appendix D presents Mezirow’s ten phases explicitly. He went on to add to and alter these phases in later work (Kitchenham, 2008; (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 1995)), but the core idea remains the same and this presentation of his view will suffice for our purposes.
begin to explore possible changes to their actions, assumptions, and beliefs. This, accompanied by testing, questioning, and trying out new meaning schemes, leads to an eventual change in meaning scheme – a transformation (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1995).

This model of learning emphasises the active, reflective, and critical role of the student in their own learning journey (Mezirow, 1990, pp. 1-19). Paolo Freire, along with philosopher and linguist Jurgen Habermas (1971), form a theoretical basis here (Kitchenham, 2008, pp. 105-108). Freire argues that the standard conception of successful teaching and learning, on which the teacher is seen as the bearer of knowledge and the students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with that knowledge, was misguided: successful learning necessarily involves active, critical reflection on the part of the student. Transformative learning has important applications to prison teaching (see above) and there is now an important literature applying Mezirow’s framework to prison teaching. Below, I present evidence that the literature indicates an important role for trust and power/empowerment in the process of transformative learning.

The Role of Trust

Pike and Hopkins (2019) find that supportive family members and communities play a significant role in the likelihood that students will undergo transformative learning (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, pp. 6-10 and 8-9). This might point towards the role of trust in achieving transformative learning. Support systems generally lend themselves to being sources of trust (and empowerment – see below), where members of the support system reinforce and encourage acceptance of new meaning schemes. Pike and Hopkins also tell us ‘[b]elonging to a learning community appeared very important to the development of social identity’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 10), which ties community membership to the development (or revising) of social identities. Below, I show that the literature indicates a central role for the development of social identities in transformative learning.

The same emphasis on community can be found in DelSesto et al. (2020) who discuss the Boston College ‘Inside-Out’ program in which students from a college campus (‘outside students’) take classes alongside students who are incarcerated (‘inside’ students’): ‘Through the humanizing experience of connecting in the classroom, students are able to develop a “renewed sense of community in education,” especially for inside students who may have felt that being “inside [prevented them] from thinking outside the intellectual box”’ (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 20). The development of community is ‘humanizing’ and as such facilitates a change in (perceived and actual) social identity.

Trust might also relate to the role respect has in transformative learning. Cheryl Keen and Robert Woods (2016) report that mutual respect between student and teacher is needed for transformation to occur. I suggest that respect is important in part because it enables teachers to cultivate trust in their students. In the following excerpt a student speaks to being treated as an adult, and hence with respect:

Sometimes however, it was merely being treated with respect which made the difference. Stuart remembered one particular teacher from one of his first prisons, “There was a woman [in a young offender institute]… she understood that a lot of people had had a troubled childhood. They took extra time. They knew how to talk to you – it was not like the school environment. Obviously some rules – can’t let you take liberties - but apart from that you were tret [treated]...”

8 For Freire, transformation takes place on a societal level, so Freire’s notion of educational transformation is broader than Mezirow’s, which happens at the level of the individual (Taylor, 2008). However, both authors make critical reflection and self-reflection primary, and both emphasise the role of transformation in the learning process.

9 Pike and Hopkins focus on Prison-Based Higher-Level Distance Learning (PHDL). In PHDL, learners are connected with a remote instructor who assigns distance-learning materials that the student studies remotely, by themselves. Despite the more specific focus, their findings are relevant to my, more general, topic.

10 Keen and Woods focused on K-12 educators who worked in correctional facilities, which differs from my focus on adult education in prison. Still, I take their findings to be relevant to my study.
like an adult” Stuart (30-39). (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 8)

In treating our students as adults, we trust them to behave in certain ways, take the work seriously, and complete the required assignments. In Stuart’s case, such an extension of respect played a positive role in his transformation.

One of the most persistent themes in the literature was that transformation encouraged the development of (or a change in) social identity (also referenced above). Pike and Hopkins compare the effects of education to the effects of religious conversions which ‘could give prisoners a new social identity to replace their criminal label, empowering them with a language and framework for forgiveness, which gave them more control over their future’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 3). (Here the theme of power and empowerment also comes out – more on this later.) Of Andrew, they tell us: ‘[he] now considers himself part of a different group of people who are educated. He is looking at things from a different perspective, from a different ‘frame of reference’” (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 14). And they quote Tristan, who says: ‘It[prison]’s […] created a good – a need to find some stability and I’ve done that through education. At the end I’ll have come out of here with a different outlook. My whole persona’s changed I like to think’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 15). An especially nice example appears in Pike and Hopkins (2019) of a student (Alan) who only made the commitment to distance learning once an education manager entrusted him with a teaching assistant job (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 9). This extension of trust helped Alan see himself in a different light – as having a different social identity - which helped him embrace a new meaning scheme. Pike and Hopkins cite other examples where students responded positively when placed in roles of responsibility (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, pp. 10-13), which emphasises the role that trust plays in transformative education.

The same sentiment is echoed by Michelle Inderbitzin (2012). For her, taking college courses offers up a ‘new identity’ and ‘alternative peer group’ (another reference to the importance of community) and is, in this way, transformative:

[students] can choose to embrace the label of student rather than that of convict or inmate; they are able to define themselves as deliberate learners who choose to spend their time and efforts on self-improvement rather than hanging out on the yard and getting into trouble. (Inderbitzin, 2012, p. 21).

Change in self-image is important also for Kristin Bumiller (2013).11 Bumiller speaks about the role of transformative education in ‘the breaking down of participants’ demonizing stereotypes of the criminal’ (Bumiller, 2013, p. 178). Old meaning schemes in which learners are positioned as bad actors are rejected in favor of new, positive meaning schemes, which allow learners to reconceptualize themselves as useful and valuable members of society.

DelSesto et al. (2020) make a similar suggestion: ‘students voiced that the class “made [them] feel like human beings” and “allows students to reclaim their self of worth, value, and mental/ creative strengths”’ (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 21). Costelloe (2014) argues that one of the primary roles of education is to ‘imbu[e] the learner with the skills, values and attitudes necessary for active citizenship’ (Costelloe, 2014, p. 30) where ‘active citizenship’ and ‘civic competency’ are ‘focused less on enabling prisoners to know their place in society and more on enabling them to re-conceptualise their place in society’ (Costelloe, 2014, p. 30). This, for Costelloe, is what makes education (potentially) transformative. Ntombizanele Gloria Vandala (2019) tells us that transformative education ‘seems to birth the realisation of particular potentials and facilitates the emergence of the true self, a self who has hope for a brighter future’ (Van Wyk, 2014, p. 75 as cited in Vandala, 2019, pp. 5-4). This further illustrates that social identity is central to transformation.

And this makes sense. A radical change in self-image is a good indication of a shift in meaning scheme. A student finds an entirely new role in the social world by revising the way they see their place in (and contributions to) it. But self-images are deeply entrenched and

11 It is worth noting that Bumiller’s work relates specifically to Boston College’s Inside-Out program.
developed over a long period; they are extremely difficult to penetrate and revise. So, it is no easy task to embrace a new meaning scheme and undergo transformation. A student’s trust in an instructor might play an essential role in their ability to undergo such a change in identity. Identity, which is a central part of one’s very self.

For students who undergo transformation, trust in oneself, in addition to trust in the teacher, seems important. Pike and Hopkins identify an increase in confidence, for instance, in Alan and Susan - two students who were offered roles as teaching assistants - and in Brian, who was offered a peer-partner job. In general, students were ‘developing an inner strength, or resilience, which would help them to overcome further barriers after release’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, pp. 15-16). They quote students who reference an increase in resiliency or self-reliance (for example, Nina p. 16) and they note that ‘[m]any of the participants felt empowered in this way, mostly through overcoming the barriers to learning but some were purely empowered by the knowledge they had gained’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 16). Overall, they suggest that transformative learning ‘encouraged participants’ personal change, how they helped them to develop their self-awareness and their resilience and raised their hopes and aspirations for future prospects upon release’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 13).

The Role of Power

Bumiller takes power to play a central role in achieving transformative learning (Bumiller, 2013, p. 178). She argues that students observe transformation as well as undergoing it (Bumiller, 2013, p. 182) by recognising the ways in which all citizens are ‘vulnerable to managerial forms of power’ (Bumiller, 2013, p. 182). When transformation is achieved, ‘[s]tudents learn the art of sociological critique—the capacity to question how institutionalized power is instrumental in the production of knowledge’ (Bumiller, 2013, p. 182). These observations bring together the themes of increased self-knowledge and power in teaching and transformation. To gain thorough self-knowledge is to come to understand the power-dynamics between oneself and other people, the state, and the teacher. For transformative learning to occur, we must endeavor to make power-dynamics visible.

There is also evidence in DelSesto et al. (2020) of the role of power in facilitating trust: ‘The respect maintained in the class allows “the class to be open, honest, and vulnerable”’ (p. 20). A sharing of power between instructor and learner is pivotal in encouraging learners to give up their old, defunct meaning schemes in preference of new, positive meaning schemes. Support systems, which are important for transformative learning (DelSesto et al., 2020.; Pike and Hopkins, 2019), might also be a source of empowerment for students. Indeed, it is conceivable this that makes them so pivotal. By receiving validation from those sources, by having a network of people who believe in them, students gain self-respect, resiliency, and self-belief. Empowered students are more likely to have the resources to identify defunct meaning schemes and the strength to overturn them.

Power-sharing in the classroom is instrumental in the cultivation of confidence in students. Empowered students have self-belief and the ability to see their merits and abilities. Persistent pronounced power asymmetries between student and teacher can stymie the students’ ability to develop self-confidence and empowerment. As we saw above, increased confidence is identified by several authors (Inderbitzin, 2012; Mezirow, 1978; Pike & Hopkins, 2019; Vandala, 2019) as partly constitutive of transformative learning. Both the quantitative and the qualitative results of Vandala’s study indicated that correctional education is transformative in the sense that it ‘boosts self-esteem and confidence, revives humanity, improves literacy levels, equips with skills and transforms offenders into law-abiding and productive citizens on release’ (Vandala, 2019, p. 1).

Positive change in social identity, identified as partly constitutive of transformative learning (Bumiller, 2013; Costelloe, 2014; DelSesto et al., 2020; Inderbitzin, 2012; Pike & Hopkins, 2019; Vandala, 2019), can also be seen as related to, even a cause of, empowerment
for students both internally and materially. According to Pike and Hopkins, transformative learning leads to difference in opportunities (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 20). Bumiller (2013) positions transformative learning as the cultivation of ‘metapragmatic moments’ - a term attributed to Luc Boltanski (2011) - in which students become acutely aware of their position within a situation, what the rules for discourse are, how they might be constrained, and how their social identities might be defined (Bumiller, 2013, p. 182). Through transformative education, students are empowered to question the entrenched social practices and structures of the world they live in. DelSesto et al. also suggest that transformative learning is facilitated by empowerment and increased agency (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 21).

We have seen that increased self-knowledge, the addition of new ways of thinking, and increased self-confidence/empowerment are operative in the cultivation of transformative learning. Through transformative learning, students learn to recognise their existing meaning schemes: they ‘come away with a greater awareness of their own beliefs, personality, disposition, and social location’ (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 20) and with an ability to recognize previously unacknowledged ‘narrow mindedness, biases and even soapboxes’ (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 20). As a result, they are better able to develop a new way of thinking (DelSesto et al., 2020, p. 22). The interaction between this new way of thinking with an increased self-knowledge might be taken to indicate that there is a distinction between the point at which students are confronted with a new meaning scheme and the point at which they adopt that meaning scheme.

The transference of power from teacher to student is evidenced in accounts (also presented above) which cite instances where students are imbued with additional responsibilities. Since giving students responsibilities is identified as facilitating transformative learning (Pike & Hopkins, 2019), we can also see a role for power and power-sharing here. I suggest that we might achieve a more thorough understanding of transformative learning if we add to our existing analysis of transformative learning, which does not currently emphasise the ‘decision point’ in a transformative learning experience.

**Situating This Study Within the Current Literature**

Given that trust and power are such prominent themes in the existing literature, it would be prudent to turn our attention more directly to those connections. Additionally, we might benefit from focussed research on the ‘decision point,’ where students must choose between adopting a new meaning scheme and rejecting the incongruous data. Through transformative learning, a student encounters a disorienting dilemma – where a new piece of information has been received that cannot be assimilated into their existing meaning scheme - and they try to resolve it. There is a gap between such a situation and a change in meaning scheme. This article adds to the current literature by discussing that gap, and by exploring the question ‘how can we encourage a change in meaning scheme over a rejection of incongruous data?’

**Methods**

I performed a qualitative study by interviewing 19 instructors and Teaching Assistants for college-level courses in prisons. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Alan Bryman’s four-stage technique (Bryman, 2008), which uses a thematic analytical framework to sort data into themes and recurring notions, questions, or concepts. At stage one, I used a combination of open and closed coding by identifying quotes and passages related to the themes of ‘trust’ and ‘power,’ adding supplemental codes later (see below). At stage two, I identified themes, codes, and sub-codes inductively (appendix B lists these and gives exemplifying quotes). At stage three, I re-read the interviews, marking the text where themes arose, making notes, and identifying labels for codes. At stage four, I used grounded theory and inductive methods to develop my account and draw conclusions about the role of trust and power in transformative learning.
Source of Data

Of the 19 interviewees, 6 were teaching assistants and 13 were instructors. All were teaching on a volunteer basis (in some cases, limited compensation was offered for expenses) under a prison education program run through a local University. Through that program, students were able to obtain credits towards an Associate degree, awarded by a local Community College (separate from the University through which the program was run). These degrees were celebrated in a formal award ceremony, which other students and select instructors and family members could attend. Instructors and teaching assistants were primarily graduate and undergraduate students at the University, though some were professors. The interviewees taught a range of topics, including English, neuroscience, philosophy, and law. Some had significant experience teaching through the program.

Interview Method

It was important to establish rapport and trust with interviewees, so I conducted semi-structured, rather than heavily structured, interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. I used a skeleton of 9 prompts and probe-questions (see Appendix A), but I did not use a set structure or read those questions directly. Talking about prison education can be difficult and emotional, especially given the level of secrecy around what is said and done behind prison walls. This methodology allowed me to gather deeper and truer data from my participants.

The ‘Decision Point’ in Transformation

I have suggested that students may not respond to a disorienting dilemma by changing their meaning scheme. A much more likely response would be to reject or reinterpret the incongruous information. We assess new evidence against a background of assumptions, beliefs, and other factors as a way of testing that evidence (Kuhn, 1962; Quine & Ullian, 1978). We generally give the background assumptions more weight than we do the new evidence because those background assumptions are built on years of experiences, teachings, and inferences and because they are more central to the ‘web’ of beliefs that we follow (Quine & Ullian, 1978). So, if a new piece of information doesn’t easily assimilate into our accepted meaning schemes, we (usually) take that as evidence that the new information is faulty.

For example, imagine that someone tells you that rats are naturally very clean creatures – cleaner, even, than cats. This new piece of information does not fit with your existing frame of reference which indicates that rats carry diseases. You have a choice: you might reject the new information as false, or you might change your meaning scheme to accommodate it; you reach the ‘decision point.’ I suggest that (shelving other important factors, such as where the information came from) it is quite unlikely that you will change your meaning scheme. Meaning schemes are, by their nature, deeply entrenched. They are made up of both individual beliefs (such as ‘rats are dirty, diseased animals’) and habits of mind (such as automatically moving from the idea of rats to feelings of disgust and fear), the latter of which are extremely difficult to overturn due to their relative invisibility.

That the ‘decision point’ is a significant stage in the transformation process is supported by both the epistemology and philosophy of science literatures and the literature on transformative learning in prisons. For example, there is a suggestion in Pike and Hopkins that self-awareness is important - indeed, a ‘pre-requisite’ (Pike & Hopkins, 2019, p. 10) – for transformative
learning. Students need to recognize the problems with their existing meaning schemes to be able to embrace new ones. Analogously, Kuhnian paradigm shifts happen only when a critical mass of anomalies has been reached (Kuhn, 1962). It is also well-recognized that the process of transformation can be distressing and alienating for students (Mezirow, 1978, 1990): discovering that a new and compelling piece of information is incommensurable with your existing meaning scheme demands critical self-reflection, which can be difficult and disorienting. This is why Mezirow emphasises connecting with the experiences of others: feelings of guilt and shame can be eased by the knowledge that others have been through something similar before. But rejecting or reinterpreting the new information is an effective way to avoid these feelings of guilt and shame and is arguably a lot easier than changing meaning scheme. The student will never reach the point of transformation if they choose to reject/reinterpret the new information rather than choosing to revise their meaning scheme.

I used data from my interviews along with the resources of philosophy of science and epistemology to develop an account of this ‘decision point’ (a table of quotes exemplifying each stage is included in Appendix C).

Stage 1: **Initial Position**
Student comes to the classroom with initial meaning scheme.

Stage 2: **New Data**
Student encounters new data.

Stage 3: **Assimilation**
Student attempts to fit new data into existing meaning scheme.

Stage 4: **Incommensurability**
Student realizes that assimilation is impossible within current meaning scheme.

Stage 5: **Altered Frames**
Student either rejects new data or adopts new meaning scheme (the ‘decision point’).

In most cases of learning, the student will assimilate the new data into their initial meaning scheme at stage three without issue. In cases of transformative learning, the student will move to stage four where they find that the new data is incommensurable with their existing meaning scheme. They then move to stage five where they choose whether to reject the new data, reinterpret it, or revise their existing meaning scheme.

So, what makes the difference between a student’s embracing a new meaning scheme and their rationalizing away the incongruent information? Looking at the ‘decision point’ can help us to answer this question and work out more effective ways of achieving transformation through learning. Below, I begin that project.

**Findings**

Here, I present three characterising questions that represent common concerns voiced in the interviews (Why are you here? Is this a ‘real’ class? What are the boundaries of power here?) along with discussion of these questions and supporting quotes from the interviews (themes and sub-codes are included in Appendix B). Using a combination of data and analysis I suggest, for transformation to occur, it is imperative that i) there is a good basis of trust between student and teacher, and ii) power is shared between teacher and student. If an adequate level of trust is not established by the time the student reaches the assimilation stage, they will be much more likely to reject the new data at stage five. If students are not empowered, they will lack the resources to overturn entrenched meaning schemes.

**Why are You Here?**

This thematic question came out of codes for ‘trust’ (‘Should I trust this instructor or
are they ‘using’ me?’) and ‘caring’ (‘Does the instructor care about me as an individual?’), but also has connections with ‘insecurity’ (‘Is the instructor using me to get something else?’). Interviews indicated students were worried that their instructors/teaching assistants were there just to pad their resumes or as part of some sort of ‘saviour complex’ as opposed to really caring about them and their views. ‘Robert’\textsuperscript{15} reports:

… at the very beginning he did ask me about my qualifications for giving the class. (Q: Really?) Yeh, yeh, at the end of the first class he came up and asked me, ‘so why did you want to teach this class, ‘cause I like to get a feel for my instructor.’ So maybe what I said made him not trust me. ‘Robert’

‘Sahil’ tells a similar story:

Actually, after I asked them all why they wanted to take neuroscience, one of the students asked me why I was teaching there, which I was a little taken aback by. I guess looking back on it, it’s not surprising why they want to know that, I mean I ask them why they were there, so why shouldn’t they ask me, right? ‘Sahil’

As does ‘Arielle’:

… we shook hands on first meeting, umm… they asked me to tell my life story (laughs). (Q: Really?). Yeah, at least my background to teaching this class. (Q: Do you remember the wording of the question?). I don’t. I think I had asked them to all introduce themselves, and then they asked me about my back-ground… ‘Arielle’

The instructors’ motives seem important for students’ trust levels. This may indicate that students are particularly protective of their meaning schemes, and suspicious of individuals offering information that contradicts them.\textsuperscript{16} For example, ‘Arielle’ (amongst others) reported that a full, detailed, and honest answer was well received:

… I told them my college and grad school background, where I’d studied and time that I’d taken off from study to work, and when I’d finished telling that story, I was sort of in my head, but I was suddenly jolted out of my own thinking to hear them all going ‘Hmmm, hmmm,’ nodding approval and, like ‘thanks’ for opening up to them. ‘Arielle’

Students’ initial meaning schemes may tell them that individuals volunteering to teach them must have certain (problematic) motives. For example:

I would often thank them at the end of class, and they would thank me, you know, they’d say ‘No thank you, we think it’s awesome that you guys come from [University] to teach us.’ And Sam (pseudonym) said, ‘It’s unbelievable.’ You know, and you could see the expression on his face; ‘I can’t believe that you guys would actually come here to teach us.’ ‘Rosalyn’

There is evidence that these students see themselves as less deserving of education, which might be a deeply entrenched part of their initial meaning schemes. ‘Rosalyn’ goes on:

I think that they know the perception that a lot of people on the outside have of them, and so I think that they were just generally curious why someone would drive an hour once a week to go teach a bunch of prisoners, when I could teach maybe people who were more deserving of it, you know. Or just spend my time doing something that people who aren’t in prison do. Why would I? I think that they deserve it, if they want it. ‘Rosalyn’

This concern also reflects a role for respect: students want to be respected as autono-

\textsuperscript{15} All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
\textsuperscript{16} A good research question might be whether such protectiveness is more pronounced in certain settings (i.e., in the prison classroom).
mous individuals and not treated as items of curiosity (DelSesto et al., 2020; Keen & Woods, 2016; Pike and Hopkins, 2019). If the instructor were there merely for their own benefit, then this might represent a lack of respect on the part of the instructor: the instructor fails to respect the personal and individual goals and life trajectories of the students themselves. There are also ties with important work (Freire, 1970; Kristjánsson, 2017) which suggests that good education aims to help students ‘flourish,’ rather than dictating a particular path or role for them. If students believed that their instructor had their best interests at heart, and if they felt that they were being treated with respect, they were much more receptive and less likely to push back against their instructor. In the following quote, ‘Keiana’ reports experiencing ‘pushback’ regarding their motives:

... I say, ‘so let’s get to know each other; you don’t know me, what questions can you ask me the answer to which will inform you whether or not I have the authority to be the instructor? And then if you can give a good reason for why that would be informative, then I’ll answer the question.’ And only at that time has there ever been students who’ve sort of challenged, have felt comfortable to challenge, and there, their concern was ‘do you care about us?’ not, like, ‘do you have the credentials?’ or whatever... ‘do you care about us?’ ‘Keiana’

My data suggests that a student who is comfortable with their teacher’s aims, methods, and intentions is more likely to revise their meaning scheme later in the face of difficult or contradictory data.

Is This a ‘Real’ Class?

The thematic question ‘is this a real class?’ came out of codes for ‘insecurity’ (‘Don’t give me special treatment’). Interviewees indicated students worried that the materials of their classes were not representative of the content of a ‘regular’ college class, that classes might be ‘dumbed down.’ ‘Marie-Rose’ reports:

I think that a lot of the guys are insecure about the legitimacy of academic credentials, I get a lot, they write about it in their papers, when they come up with examples, and it also seeps into a lot of the discourse in the class, they’re worried that this isn’t a real college class, this is just somebody coming in and doing their little thing, but it’s not like real education, and we’re not being challenged like real college students are challenged, and I don’t think that has to be the way I’m doing the classes, I think that’s a worry that they carry into the program, so they’re really insecure about that, and it affects their behavior. ‘Marie-Rose’

This kind of insecurity can also result in pushback, as reported by ‘Janet’:

... so, I have people saying, if I’m lenient with them about things ‘no don’t be lenient, I want to earn it... I think you made a mistake grading my paper but don’t change the grade, let me rewrite the paper.’ ‘Janet’

This might be taken to exemplify a move from incommensurable data to rationalization. The student’s initial meaning scheme tells them that the work will be too hard for them, or that they are not capable of achieving a high score, but new data tells them they have achieved a high score. In ‘Janet’s’ case, rationalization was opted for over a change in meaning scheme. A similar example of pushback resulting from a lack of trust comes from ‘Ella-Louise’:

... another thing that happened was in the mid-term exam, I had... this is also example of push back... I gave them 20 study questions and I said there are 10 questions on the exam paper taken from these questions, and [University] students would be thrilled by that, ‘Awesome! If I answer these questions, I can get an A or B exam!’ But some of these guys were mad about that; they were, like, ‘don’t do that, that’s making it not a real class, that’s making it not hard
like it’s supposed to be,’ and one guy was, like, ‘a real college class would never do that.’ ‘Ella-Louise’

Again, there is a rejection of incongruent data because the student’s existing meaning scheme does not allow them to accept that ‘real’ college work would be ‘doable’ in this way. ‘Ella-Louise’ continues:

… But sort of it’s a trust issue because they don’t trust the class to be like a real college class and they’re insecure about that. ‘Ella-Louise’

A further quote brings out how rationalization might be used to protect a deeply entrenched meaning scheme:

Maybe they’re intimidated by the class, and they tell themselves it’s not a real class. Maybe some students who tell themselves it’s not a real class do it because they’re intimidated, as a way of justifying not working as hard. I could also see other prisoners who are intimidated by those who get into the class trying to deal with that by minimizing achievement, minimizing their achievement by saying ‘it’s not a real class anyway.’ ‘Marcus’

If the conditions are right, this kind of incongruous and disorienting data can result in a change in meaning scheme, but my data indicates that this requires deep levels of trust and security.

**What are the Boundaries of Power Here?**

The interviews indicate that power plays a special role in transformative learning. Interviewees spoke of cases where students seemed resistant to them or their methods and attempted to test the power-dynamics in class. This gave rise to the thematic question ‘what are the boundaries of power here?’ which came out of coding for ‘power’ and ‘resistance.’

Pushback and resistance may indicate that the students are experiencing the discomfort of the incommensurability stage. ‘Allison’ reports:

… they all got back their first exam and I guess he didn’t do as well as he had hoped, and so he told Jimmy (pseudonym), ‘don’t expect too much from me because I’m not going to reach those expectations, I’m just here to pass the class and get my credits and leave, I don’t care about any of the information I’m learning,’ or something like that. ‘Allison’

‘Allison’ later reflects on this event and suggest that it is an instance of pushback that serves as ‘self-handicapping’:

But, yeah, he just pushed back against Jimmy (pseudonym), and he thinks that it might be something to do with self-handicapping, just like resisting authority maybe. ‘Allison’

This might demonstrate how entrenched meaning schemes can be reinforced when a student perceives there to be problematic power-dynamics at work. In this instance, the student gets a low grade, which seems to cohere with an existing (problematic) meaning scheme and uses that data to reject or rationalize away the desire to do well in the class: they reason that they are there only to pass the class, and not to excel or grow.

Pushback was often exemplified in doubt of the credentials or proficiency of an instructor:

… so, the resistance at [University] is more because I’m asking them to do something different, the resistance at [Prison] is because I’m asking them to do something that’s hard, OK. One is just, ‘you’re making me work harder than I thought I was going to have to work in a college class,’ versus ‘you’re making me do something that is so different than what I’ve been rewarded for all through my high school experience, I’m not even sure I should accept that this
is a reasonable way of doing this.’ ‘Bella’

‘Shane’ reports on a similar situation:

we had one moment where I felt really, really stressed by the power-dynamics in that class last semester. Because he’s [the student] kind of a History buff, so we’d have all these very specific questions about dates and events… stuff…. and I felt like he was sort of crossing a line and actually, like, testing me, rather than just asking because he was curious. He was, sort of, like ‘I don’t think you actually know anything,’ you know, ‘History? You just know this wishy-washy stuff.’ ‘Shane’

The student doesn’t believe that the class is a ‘real’ class – that doesn’t fit within their existing meaning scheme – so they reason that the instructor is underqualified. This might be taken as an example of rationalization in response to uncomfortable power asymmetries. The student is rebelling against the instructor’s power qua instructor – the power they have to make judgments on the quality of their work, or their academic abilities.

On the other hand, there were some instances in which students were perhaps overly accepting of an instructor’s claims and power. ‘Jenson’ recalls:

I feel like the prisoner is much more trusting in the authority of the instructor to be the knowledgeable one, like in our psychology class Daisy (pseudonym) has a lot of knowledge as a psychologist, so if they have any questions they’ll take her word for it. Whatever she says… ‘Jenson’

This demonstrates the influence of power-dynamics on the changing or reinforcing of meaning schemes. If the student’s meaning scheme tells them that students (in this case the instructor was a graduate student) of [University] are particularly able and to be revered, then that will affect the power-dynamic between student and teacher and the likelihood that meaning schemes will be altered. In this case, it might be very hard for ‘Jenson’ to challenge this conception because of the asymmetry in power relations between themselves and the student.

‘Kathryn’ tells a similar story:

There’s definitely more skepticism in [University] classrooms than in prison classrooms because even when they’re reading, the prison students might assume that the information is accurate as opposed to objectionable you know, like they do in [University]. ‘Kathryn’

The interviews indicate that establishing a level of trust with the students early on encouraged them to not reject new data even in the face of uncomfortable critical self-reflection and an effective way to do this was by ‘ceding power.’ For example:

One thing is just more ceding power, just letting students have more say; more students in prison have more say over kind of the progress in the classroom, the content of the class, and more of us just acknowledging… kind of acknowledging that [University] students come from… almost a… more cookie cutter than most students in that they both have access to different ideas and different ways of thinking. ‘Dean’

Ceding power in this way also came in the form of openness, which connects with my earlier findings regarding respect. Teachers often reported that they were careful to be ‘open’ to different ideas and different means of expression in their students.

… I graded a few [papers] and, you know, very, very conscious of being open to a lot of different ideas, and the quality of ideas too. ‘Joseph’

This tactic was generally reported to be beneficial. The following instructor speaks to the tactic of accepting, acknowledging, and attending to the (perceived) needs to the students to keep them on-track:
And I think at [Prison Education Program] things got more derailed more often in more weird directions. There’s a lot of me just trying to accommodate and some of their needs are, like, ‘explain this new technology to us, we’re curious about it,’ and I’ll just, like, for a couple of minutes… but then in a kind of a jokey way ‘ok guys, let’s go back to work.’ That’s worked for me at [Prison Education Program]. ‘Frank’

One interesting remark points towards a different kind of relationship between pushback and power relations, in which a change in the power-dynamic (coming from the instructor admitting they don’t know the answer to a question) leads to occasional pushback from the students:

‘Angus’: for the people who care, I think it’s all about how you do the ‘I don’t know’ thing, and there’s lots of moments where I’m very comfortably ‘I don’t know,’ and then there are the testing moments where you’re just, like ‘shut up, stop pushing me, that’s not cool.’

Interviewer: And the difference between those two kinds of moments… where does the difference come from, do you think? It’s in the type of question that’s being asked of you? Or do you think it’s in the context?

‘Angus’: I mean, I have to say ‘I don’t know’ not very often, so it can be very ‘let’s move on’…. like, how much is it something I actually should know? […] And if it’s a friendly environment it’s easy to say ‘I should know that, I’ll get back to you’ kind of thing, but if it’s not, if there’s a sort of vibe of, like, ‘this whole thing is bullshit’… (Q: they’re testing you), yeah. ‘Angus’

‘Angus’ cedes power by showing vulnerability, admitting he did not know something, and the students responded somewhat negatively to this; it led to their questioning ‘Angus’ capability as an instructor. However, there was other evidence that this kind of approach can be successful. The difference might depend upon the students’ trust-levels. They begin suspicious that the class is not authentic and are presented with lots of data which contradicts that supposition, but they home in on the data that seems to corroborate it; their instructor’s admittance that they ‘do not know.’ If a level of trust is established early on, this might encourage students to see the data more analytically and accurately.

Transformative learning has been correlated with an increase in empowerment as students find new ways to conceptualize themselves and their place in society (Bumiller, 2013; DelSesto et al., 2020; Inderbitzin, 2012; Pike & Hopkins, 2019). A sharing of power might be taken at the very least as correlative with transformative learning, if not as partly constitutive of it. If we take the arguments of Bumiller (2013) seriously, we might also come to believe recognition and exposing of power-dynamics is essential in the pursuit of transformative education. I would again relate this fact to what I have been calling the ‘decision point.’ Once power relations are acknowledged and exposed, students are in a better, more informed, position and hence more able to make considered decisions regarding the embracing or rejecting of new meaning schemes.

**Future Research**

This project highlights the importance of the ‘decision point’ in transformation and suggests that trust and power play a particularly important role in the conclusion of that decision. Before concluding, I will offer some particularly fruitful avenues for further investigation.

**A Broader Range of Data**

There are many more facilities that run college programs in prison, and many more
instructors who could give valuable insights into the experience of teaching in a prison. The fact that my interviewees were working on a volunteer basis may have influenced the data gathered. It may make a difference to the security of the students, the power-dynamics, and the behaviour of the instructors. It would be valuable to gather evidence from educators who work on a contracted, paid basis. It also bears mentioning that, in my investigation, the students were all male. Further data is needed here too.

The Students’ Experience of Transformation

I was unable to conduct interviews with or gather data from the students themselves. This is problematic both analytically and ethically. It is problematic analytically because it narrows the scope of the data I have gathered. It is problematic ethically because it further silences an already silenced group. I had the opportunity to informally ask students about their feelings towards prison teaching research and their reactions were always guarded and skeptical, but they were generally frustrated that there were so many academics talking about the experience of being in a prison without actually talking to the people who are in prison. This needs to be remedied.

The Ethics of Transformation

In addition to research that focuses on the conditions that are required for transformation, what the experience of transformation is like, and other questions having to do with how we can facilitate transformative learning, it is important for us to consider whether and when aiming for transformative learning is ethical, especially given its profound effects. While some transformations of this kind are positive, others may be extremely negative. An individual in an emotionally abusive relationship may come to have a transformative learning experience through repeatedly being told that they are worthless. Imposter syndrome is also a learned experience. As I encourage further investigation into the role of transformative education in prison classrooms, I feel I must also encourage further investigation into the ethics of transformative education.

Conclusion

This project focused on the role of trust and power in a particular stage of the process of transformative learning – specifically, the stage at which the student either decided to alter their meaning scheme or to reject the new information. Data from 19 interviews with prison educators suggests that power and trust may be particularly important at stage five of my five-stage addition to the classic Mezirow account of transformative learning and that, by building a foundation of trust and power-sharing/empowerment early on, students are more likely to change their meaning schemes when encountered with incommensurable data rather than rejecting of reinterpreting that data.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Questions

The following is a list of interview questions and probes that I used as jumping-off points in my interviews with prison educators. I did not ask every question of every individual, nor did I follow a strict, predetermined structure for the interviews. Rather, I tried my best to make the interviews feel like informal conversations, in order to encourage the interviewees to feel comfortable and to open up.

1. What is the most defining feature of your experience teaching in a prison?
2. Was there anything that surprised you about your students in prison?
3. What differences have you noticed in teacher-student dynamics comparing prison teaching with non-prison teaching? Probe: what steps have you taken in light of these considerations? How do they affect the class?
4. How does your relationship with your incarcerated students differ from your relationship with your non-incarcerated students? How does it differ from students’ relationships and interactions with each other?
5. Have you experienced student resistance to certain tasks or assignments? Probe: Can you tell me a bit about those cases? What was the task, in what ways were the students resistant, why were they resistant? How did you deal with the resistance?
6. Have you experimented with any techniques for improving poor relationships with incarcerated students? How well do you think they worked?
7. How do you foster trust in your prison classroom? Probe: Was this easy or difficult? How does it compare to fostering trust in the non-prison classroom?
8. Did you notice any behavioural changes in your students over the course of the semester? Probe: Can you remember any particular cases/circumstances? What do you think prompted their change?
9. Have you noticed any ‘breakthroughs’ with students? Probe: Can you tell me a bit about that breakthrough? What prompted their change?
### Appendix B

#### Themes, Subcodes, and Exemplifying Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subcodes</th>
<th>Exemplifying Quotes</th>
<th>Exemplifying Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
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<td>I think it’s the tone of the question… I mean, I have to say ‘I don’t know’ not very often, so it can be very ‘let’s move on’... like, how much is it something I actually should know? [...] And if it’s a friendly environment it’s easy to say ‘I should know that, I’ll get back to you’ kind of thing, but if it’s not, if there’s a sort of vibe of, like, ‘this whole thing is bullshit’... (Q: they’re testing you). yeah. - A</td>
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<td>Personally, I just handed essays back with comments and he said ‘well, I’m not sure that I really understand your comments but you’ve earned my trust now so I’m going to go with it.’ [...] what he seemed to be responding to was me showing that I care about him being engaged in the class and, you know, trying to cater to his interests - B</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>They do not respect teachers who they think are there for résumé building or to write a paper [...] and so I think that the dynamic is really important with respect and trust, because they don’t trust people they don’t respect, and they’re not going to respect you, or trust you, if they think that your motives aren’t there. - C</td>
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<td>So I try to do something that’s kind of simple to do in the course of the semester in our class, but I changed it in the next class I taught, was just the way that I was structuring syllabi, so, trying to not have too many readings, and not too long, and also trying to build in days where we just talk about concepts or something, basic reading to do. So that’s something that from our class I felt like that could be helpful, and I tried to do in my writing seminars at [University] campus too. - I</td>
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<td>Caring</td>
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<td>They are receptive. They really had no idea how much time and effort goes into planning the classes, grading the assignments and getting the materials ready. Umm, I had them do an exercise to evaluate how much time and effort they were putting in and how much time and effort I was putting in, we were kind of gauging whether we were putting in enough or too much... it was in the first half of the semester so we tried to figure out whether we needed to adjust. It was, like, having really open conversations about what my struggles are, why I was doing certain things, and then adapting... - D</td>
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<td>I’ve had a couple of students at [Prison 1] and I guess at [Prison 2] who... usually what happens is that they really don’t like one of the books or stories that we’re reading and they really want everyone to know about it. And so they will basically do nothing but insult the book or the story [...]. On the occasions where I’ve had [this] type of resistant student [...] usually I’ll just try to bring them into the spotlight: ‘OK what don’t you like about it?’ ‘Why don’t you like that thing? Why do you think it’s in there even if you don’t like it?’ We’re going to have an academic conversation in a purposeful way even though you don’t like it because it’s character building for you. Q: And? How do they react to that? A: Um, it works to varying degrees. Again, fundamentally you have to want to be brought in. And if you don’t want to be brought in in no amount of pushing from me is going to bring you in. But frequently what I will find is that they actually do want to talk about this book and you can find something in it that they don’t hate with sufficient prodding. - J</td>
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<td>We have a lot of discussion in our classes. I don’t know on what basis they would say ‘[you’re wrong]’ to me... unless they could say to me ‘but wait, it says here...’ That happens. And then I know I have said ‘do you know, I didn’t even see that, I’m so glad you saw that, wait a minute now I have to think. So what do you think, when you said that what did you think?’ And then we’ll go that way. I love it when they can do that. - L</td>
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<td>... at some point I think I just said to them ‘I feel like I’ve learned some things since I started coming here, but I’m still... there’s still a lot of things that you know better, what the rules are and, you know, what’s O.K. or not and you need to tell me if I’m doing something that’s stupid, or if I give you something that you shouldn’t have,’ or... I mean... just sort of being... ‘there’s so much I can learn from you, teaching here, and you have a better sense of what the limits are. And I trust you, also, to tell me if something’s off.’ - M</td>
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<td>I’m sure they do trust me in terms of being somebody who isn’t going to give them misinformation about [discipline], I think that’s probably true. Maybe the way I show that is, if I don’t know something I just say that I’m not sure but I’m going to look it up and the next week I do tell them what I’ve looked up; I’m very careful to do that because I think it’s important that students trust that I’m going to do what I say I’m going to do. - N</td>
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<td>I know some people who are in down-and-out situations don’t trust the supposed selfishness of people who are trying to help them, they think ‘you’re just helping me because it feels good to you, you don’t really care about me,’ or ‘you’re just helping me because you have some political agenda, but really I don’t care about your political agenda, I just want to get out of here, and I want you to help me get out of here.’ - O</td>
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... rather than […] dogmatically going ahead with whatever they think is going to work; there are science guys who’ve tried to do that by ‘filling the empty cups’ and end up with really unhappy students. […] They don’t want to sit and listen for three hours, they want to be active participants, and if an instructor doesn’t take advantage of that, student learning, I think, is jeopardised. - E

I feel like the prisoner is much more trusting in the authority of the instructor to be the knowledgeable one, like in our [discipline] class [the instructor] has a lot of knowledge as a [student of the discipline], so if they have any questions they’ll take her word for it whatever she says […] recently they asked her ‘oh do you know if there’s any one language in the world that has the most emotional words?’ or something and she’s like ‘oh, I don’t know but I can come back and tell you that, I’ll figure it out for next week.’ - K

... yeah, the earlier thing where the guy… where I paired them up and the guy said ‘no I’m not going to work with him’… um… at first I said ‘well, you have to’ like ‘too bad,’ and I think he gave me, he pushed back a little bit, but things got a little bit chaotic at that point because, I think the TA intervened, and said ‘well maybe this anyway isn’t the best way to pursue, to cover this topic, let’s [set up] splitting people into pairs, let’s instead do it this other way,’ and I guess that I just deferred to the TA's judgment on that because I was having trouble. I didn’t want to have a show-down and force these people to work together, and here, the TA was coming up with this really good idea so I just went with it. So, she sort of saved me from having to come up with a solution. - P

It’s different resistance... so, the resistance at [University] is more because I’m asking them to do something different, the resistance at [Prison] is because I’m asking them to do something that’s hard, OK. One is just, ‘you’re making me work harder than I thought I was going to have to work in a college class,’ versus ‘you’re making me do something that is so different than what I’ve been rewarded for all through my high school experience, I’m not even sure I should accept that this is a reasonable way of doing this. - F

There’s definitely more scepticism in [University] classrooms than in prison classrooms because even when they’re reading, the prison students might assume that the information is accurate as opposed to objectionable you know, like they do in [University]. They put more weight into what they’re reading and instruct themselves as opposed to college students who can do their own research and figure out what the diversity of thought is. - K

I did have one student, actually just last class… they all got back their first exam and I guess he didn’t do as well as he had hoped, and so he told [instructor], ‘don’t expect too much from me because I’m not going to reach those expectations, I’m just here to pass the class and get my credits and leave, I don’t care about any of the information I’m learning’ - K

Resistance

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## Appendix C
The Five-Stage Model with Exemplifying Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Stage Description</th>
<th>Exemplifying Quote</th>
<th>Application to Prison</th>
<th>Role of Trust and Power</th>
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<tr>
<td>1: Initial Position</td>
<td>The student comes to the classroom with initial meaning scheme</td>
<td>I mean, in prison, right, everyone around them can exert power on them… other prisoners, guards, the state, the federal government, like everyone has control over them to some extent. They have such little autonomy, and they have no control over their environment, and they’re extremely wary... - Q</td>
<td>Incarcerated students reside in a space that can be disempowering and not conducive to trust. Subsequently, they develop a meaning scheme which tells them that they have no power, and that others intend to wield their power over them.</td>
<td>If the student’s initial meaning scheme allows for appropriate trust and if it allows them to see where appropriate power relations are held, then they are less likely to push back against new meaning schemes.</td>
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<td>2: New Data</td>
<td>The student encounters new data</td>
<td>I think that their expectation of lots of structure, lots of things decided for them, conflicts with my wanting to empower them and give them some […] power over the direction of their course or their assignments and so I think we’ve been working to figure that out because I might not have given them the structure that they’re used to. - R</td>
<td>The classroom experience introduces prison students to new data, either because they have less educational background or because the classroom environment is so different from that of the prison generally (at least in cases where teachers do not exert inappropriate levels of power, and extends trust to them). They may also be introduced to new data regarding the subject matter of the class.</td>
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<td>3: Assimilation</td>
<td>The student attempts to fit new data into their existing meaning scheme</td>
<td>…a lot of the guys are insecure about the legitimacy of academic credentials […] they write about it in their papers, when they come up with examples, and it also seeps into a lot of the discourse in the class, they’re worried that this isn’t a real college class, this is just someone coming in and doing their own little thing, but it’s not like a real education. - S</td>
<td>In the prison classroom, the attempt to assimilate often involves the questioning of intentions and the testing of power. Successful assimilation might be seen in a student who already has a healthy view of good power relations between student and teacher and subsequently recognizes that as being present in their class.</td>
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<td>4: Incommensurability</td>
<td>The student realizes that assimilation is impossible within their current meaning scheme</td>
<td>I just handed essays back with comments and he said ‘well I’m not really sure I understand your comments but you’ve earned my trust now so I’m going to go with it’ - B</td>
<td>In the case of incarcerated students, their existing meaning scheme is likely to tell them that others are sources of power and distrust, whereas the new meaning scheme (hopefully) indicates that they have power in the classroom and as a result of their learning and that their teacher cares for/trusts them.</td>
<td>Incommensurability is reached when i) the student’s initial meaning scheme indicates that teachers abuse their power and/or fail to trust/be trusted and ii) the teacher in fact extends trust to the student and embodies an appropriate power dynamic. So, incommensurability will (sometimes) result when power and trust are treated appropriately by the teacher.</td>
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<td>5: Altered Frames</td>
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<td>The student either rejects the new data or adopts new meaning scheme (this is the ‘decision point’ in transformative learning)</td>
<td>The [incarcerated] students […] have a great deal of appreciation for having classes offered to them because it takes them so far outside their normal environment […] at most universities […] I don’t think, at least in general, that they see that their professors are people who are their because they care about them or want to see them succeed, they’re just there to perform some task that they need to do so that they can get their grades [and] go to law school or whatever - U</td>
<td>Especially in the prison setting, students who undergo transformation are reported to be empowered, to develop new (positive) social identities, to be less likely to re-offend, and to have better future prospects.</td>
<td>A change in meaning scheme requires significant levels of trust between student and teacher. If the teacher extends trust towards the student (by being open and honest, by showing caring, by giving the student additional responsibilities), the student is more likely to trust the instructor. If the student trusts the teacher, they are more likely to adopt a new meaning scheme due to trust that the new meaning scheme is the correct one. If there is a power imbalance between student and teacher, then the student is less likely to feel pushed into the new meaning scheme and less likely to push back against it. If the student is empowered, they are more likely to have the tools required to overhaul and critique their existing meaning scheme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in Meaning Scheme</td>
<td>Rationalization or Rejection</td>
<td>…on the exam one of the questions was ‘define rationalization and give an example,’ and a student gave a brilliant and also really heartbreaking example of somebody who is intimidated by their prison class and, as a result of that, doesn’t take the class, and then rationalizes that by saying to himself ‘it’s not a real class.’ - V</td>
<td>In non-prison classes, rejection/rationalization is more likely than transformation because meaning schemes are deeply entrenched. But there are also good reasons to expect that it is especially rare in cases of prison teaching because certain existing meaning schemes - which indicate disempowerment and distrust - are reinforced regularly outside of the classroom, in the standard prison setting.</td>
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Appendix D

Mezirow’s Ten-Phase Account

Mezirow’s ten-phase account of transformative learning is presented here.

Phase 1: The student experiences a disorienting dilemma.

Phase 2: The student performs self-examination in light of the disorienting dilemma which often brings on feelings of guilt and/or shame.

Phase 3: The student critically assesses their epistemic and sociocultural assumptions in order to try to resolve the dilemma.

Phase 4: The student recognizes that others have been through a similar experience.

Phase 5: The student explores possible changes to their actions, assumptions, and beliefs.

Phase 6: The student makes a plan for moving forward.

Phase 7: The student gathers the skills to put that plan into motion.

Phase 8: The student tries out their new assumptions, beliefs etc.

Phase 9: The student, via testing, gains self-confidence in their new meaning-scheme.

Phase 10: The student integrates the new assumptions, beliefs etc. into their meaning scheme.
Rethinking Social Reintegration and Prison: A Critical Analysis of an Educational Proposal for an Alternative Model in Brazil

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Abstract: The call for social reintegration of prisoners, in many cases, does not work or has been abandoned, leaving the question of inclusivity regarding the imprisoned an open challenge in contemporary societies. My study provides a critical analysis of a model defined as an educational system of social reintegration, which aspires to be an alternative to imprisonment in Brazil and worldwide by proposing a reduction in the recidivism rate at a lower cost. I discuss the possibilities of social reintegration and the educational conceptions and practices that can emerge from it, though a document analysis and ethnography of two model units. Starting from an already-existing model, I argue that, even in an extremely difficult context, it is possible to build a proposal for social reintegration that goes beyond mere bureaucratic marketing. This can improve the prospects of imprisoned people’s re-entry into society, despite the persistence of stigmatisation and other difficulties attending their return to a society affected by high unemployment rates.

Keywords: prison education, rehabilitation, re-entry, prison sociology, adult education.

Introduction

We know from Goffman’s classical analysis (1961, 1963) that social reintegration has not affected existing practices in prisons, and from Foucault’s genealogical analysis (1975) that prison reforms have not been implemented. Despite various critiques, there is an internationally recognised need to use prison as only the last measure, and to adopt alternatives when possible (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007). The phenomenon of mass imprisonment has also been observed in some countries (Wacquant, 2009) – including, in increasing numbers, people with a low level of formal education and those from economically and socially marginalised backgrounds (Coyle et al., 2016).

Although international legislation recognises the importance of implementing reintegration projects in society (United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners [the Nelson Mandela Rules], 2015), this objective remains a form of ‘bureaucratic marketing’ in certain countries (Wacquant, 1999), and it has been implicitly abandoned in the discourses of politicians in other countries (Garland, 1999). In this scenario, it is not surprising that recidivism is considered high (Fazel & Wolf, 2015). Social inclusion of imprisoned people must be reformulated urgently and critically, and must take into account Italy’s experience of overcoming another institution: the asylums (Babini, 2009; Basaglia & Franca, 1975).

To address this need, the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicted Persons (APAC) defines and manages an educational model that is oriented towards the so-
cial reintegration of prisoners. APAC is growing worldwide, and may lead to public policy resolutions in the Brazilian territory (Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados [FBAC], 2019a). They have a vision to ensure that education is not merely school education or training for a profession, but is innovative, and involves a variety of agents in the reintegration project, including volunteers, the outside society and its institutions – not to mention the prisoners themselves.

There is a growing interest in the APAC model. Its rates of recidivism are lower than those found in the traditional prison system: The APAC rates range from 8% to 20%, versus the national index of 70% (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público, 2013).1 It is also cost-effective to the State, and there are very few cases of insubordination, rebellion, violence, and escape, contrary to what is evidenced in the traditional Brazilian prison system. This experience is described as ‘the most important fact that is happening in the world today, in prison matters’ (FBAC, 2016) by Prison Fellowship International, a consultative body for penitentiary affairs of the United Nations.

This study aims to provide a framework for rethinking theory and practice concerning education and the reintegration of prisoners, in the academic context as well as for those working within the prison. Two main questions guided the study: How does the APAC model conceive and define its educational project aimed at the reintegration of prisoners, and how is this project implemented in the most successful APAC units?

1. To address these questions, official APAC documents were collected and analysed in regards how the organisation represents itself and its model.

2. To identify critical issues in practical implementations of the model, a subsequent literature review was carried out, based upon all published work directly relevant to the best practices of reintegration. Given the scarcity of studies, special attention was paid to those works available in the Brazil research archive.

3. For further analysis of the practices and their applications, an ethnographic study was designed. The particular vulnerability of prisoners was considered. A 5-week participant-observation period was carried out between 2017 and 2019 by living in two units that had been identified as the most successful. Twenty open, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key participants, including prisoners, directors, judges, teachers, social workers, psychologists and educators.

4. The model was finally contextualised in the light of Brazilian penal execution law and compared with other studies on the prison.

In this paper, a critical reflection was conducted using principles of philosophy, prison sociology and education, based on the analysis from this more extensive study. First, the model will be briefly described. After that, issues will be examined emerging from the analysis of researchers and the field period. Due to space considerations, only some of them have been selected.2

Description of the Model Managed by APAC

APAC was created in 1972 in São José dos Campos, São Paulo, under the leadership of an attorney named Mario Ottoboni, as ‘a private, non-profit legal entity that seeks the recovery of prisoners, the protection of society, the relief of victims and the promotion of restorative justice’ (Restán, 2017, p. 9). It emerged as a response to numerous rebellions that had occurred within Brazilian prisons. In one such rebellion, the local prison was destroyed, and a group of volunteers was asked to manage a structure to accommodate prisoners with whom they had built up good relations. The experience (which was originally intended to be temporary) lasted

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1 The measurement of recidivism rates in common prisons in Brazil is a complex task, also resulting in difficulties when it comes to comparison of recidivism rates in APAC units.
2 For more information, see Grossi (2020a, 2020b, 2021),
for over a year, and when the public authorities wanted to assume the management of the space directly, a form of co-management had already been generated which the volunteers and prisoners asked to be maintained.

According to the Brazilian Fraternity of Assistance to Convicted Persons (FBAC), the body that supervises the APAC, there are 129 local APAC units in Brazil today, 51 in operation and 78 in the implementation phase, each running a centro de reintegração social (centre of social reintegration [CRS]) without police, with 43 male and eight female centres in ten Brazilian states (FBAC, 2019a). Since 1972, the association has provided support to 48,501 recuperandos\(^3\) so that it can be considered a consolidated experience. This project has been developed in Brazil, where since the 1990s, the prison population has increased by 707%. In 2016, the country had 726,712 prisoners, representing the third-largest prison population in the world, after the United States and China (Departamento Penitenciário Nacional [DEPEN], 2017). In 2016, there was a lack of vacancies for 358,663 prisoners.

The prison population (like the victims of homicide) is composed mostly of young people and persons of African descent. The majority of people in prison have a low level of education: As of 2016, 6% were illiterate, 56% had not completed primary education, and just over 9% had completed secondary education (DEPEN, 2017). However, we see that in these situations, only 15% of the prison population were engaged in work activities in June 2016 (DEPEN, 2017), and of these, only 13% worked outside the prison. Only 10% were in school activities, and the other 2% were involved in extracurricular activities such as reading, sports, leisure events, watching videos in the library, and engaging in assorted cultural experiences (DEPEN, 2017).

Consider now how APAC describes the CRS. Contrary to what is found in the traditional model, these centres are described as peaceful places with relaxed and aesthetically pleasing atmospheres, and without the levels of anger and violence present in prisons. The spaces are not overcrowded; they are clean and free of unpleasant odours, with the architecture designed for reintegration activities. The recuperandos wear their own clothes (not uniforms) and are called by their own names, thereby maintaining their individual identities. They are considered citizens serving a sentence (Restán, 2017).

In a CRS, according to APAC descriptions (Restán, 2017), there are no armed guards; nor is physical violence used. These conditions are achieved through a security policy based on personal relationships between operators and prisoners, with respect for human rights and dignity, according to clear and well-known rules. Building trust also involves co-management of the facilities: prisoners have the keys to the prison and take care of cleanliness, organisation, discipline, and security, in an effort to work together with APAC, volunteers and administrative staff (Restán, 2017). Each APAC branch is, according to the description, managed by a team that believes in the social reintegration of prisoners. They are mostly volunteers and are trained to relate to each other and resolve conflicts without weapons. All of them are considered educators according to the ‘pedagogy of presence’\(^4\) (Costa, 2010; Valdeci, 2016).

The APAC literature represents prisoners not as monsters, but as human beings. This is in keeping with modern theories of criminology (Baratta, 2019; Garland, 2001) and the idea, Todos somos recuperandos (‘We are all recuperandos’), since, as stated by APAC, we are all potential offenders. From this perspective, everyone is considered recoverable – regardless of the type of crime – and recovery is seen as the task of society, not only of the individuals themselves, as is seen in some contemporary reintegration programs (Garland, 1999). For this reason, all people are accepted in APAC units regardless of the type of crime and internal prison

\(^3\) Persons deprived of their liberty in the APAC system.

\(^4\) We want to change the other when we are not able to change ourselves. To be an educator is to educate oneself, to be sincere, authentic and transparent, before wanting to educate the other. In short, we could say that the pedagogy of presence implies knowing each one of the prisoners serving time in APAC. Their names, genealogy, stories, dreams, projects, expectations, joys, anxieties, worries, defeats, disappointments, fears (Valdeci, 2016, p. 236).
discipline. APAC states that internal prison discipline problems may be due to other situations of conflict. To participate in the programme, people must have been convicted and spent a period of at least one year in prison and must apply to an APAC unit. Also, they must agree to take part in the unit's internal activities, which include work, educational and spiritual activities. People who do not fulfil these commitments, engage in violence, use drugs, or escape will be returned to prison.

According to reports, the recuperandos participate in many events. In this model, all prisoners leave their cells at 7:00 a.m. and return at 10:00 p.m. They work, study, and have other activities. Education is fundamental in this model; in addition to attending supplementary and professional courses, the recuperandos in the closed system practice labour therapy. In the semi-open system, they have specialised labour activities (professional training workshops are offered in the reintegration centres). In the open regimen, the recuperandos work outside the walls of the reintegration centre and their work emphasises social insertion. This is associated with different motivational speeches that aim to promote ‘human valorisation’ and the re-encounter of recuperandos with themselves.

Certain aspects of informal education are also considered important in the CRS: Coexistence in the units is an educational issue with a variety of open channels of communication with the administration, ranging from dormitory meetings to collective meetings. The daily routine of interaction and coexistence among prisoners, who cannot practice any form of violence, is also described as an ‘awareness generator’. It is also worth noting that education is offered not only to prisoners; volunteers, family members, and society itself must be trained to welcome recuperandos who are returning to life. According to the APAC documents, visitors, volunteers, and the external work of prisoners offer continuous exchanges with society. As the APAC units need active community support to survive, the education of society towards understanding and welcoming the recuperandos is another objective.

Society enters the units through exhibitions, open activities, videos, and school visits. Interactions with the public also occur when the recuperandos go out to work. The CRS also offers rooms for visitors and researchers. Research is encouraged, and a support centre for research is located in Itaúna, Minas Gerais. The APAC units depend on the organised civil society, because one of the pillars of this model is volunteering, which (according to the APAC literature) needs to be a testimony to ‘unconditional love’. Municipalisation is another characteristic of this model, so the contact between the recuperandos and the community that will receive them at the end of their sentences is particularly important.

According to APAC founder Mario Ottoboni’s 2014 book, Kill the Criminal, Save the Person: The APAC Methodology, the APAC method comprises 12 fundamental elements that arise from experiences with those deprived of liberty. In the book, Ottoboni argues that each of these elements must be applied in harmony with all the others to achieve the goal of social reintegration. If the elements are applied separately, the method may fail, as has been seen. The 12 elements are: (1) community participation; (2) reciprocal help between recuperandos; (3) work; (4) spirituality; (5) juridical assistance; (6) health care; (7) human valorisation through education, professionalisation and reality therapy; (8) family; (9) volunteers; (10) the CRS; (11) merit; and (12) the Day of Liberation, a spiritual retreat conducted by APAC. ‘Unconditional love and trust’ (Ottoboni, 2014, p. 65) undergird the application of the APAC methodology, as manifested by the volunteers who must welcome, forgive, and engage in dialogue with the recuperandos without partiality.

The following section presents a discussion of research that has analysed the APAC units at distinct times in the course of the evolution of the model.

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5 Threats and disrespectful or offensive words in units are punished as disciplinary failures. Physical assault can be punished by returning the recuperandos to an ordinary prison.

6 To critically explore these elements, see Grossi (2020a, 2020b, 2021).
Discussion: An Analysis of APAC practice

This section discusses studies that have analysed the APAC model, with due consideration for the fact that comparison is difficult because each study was conducted in a particular CRS at a unique historical moment. However, it is important to review these analyses to have a more complex view of the model proposed by APAC and to understand its practical implementation. In the studies pertaining to Brazil, APAC units are analysed and described in distinct – and often conflicting – ways.

In Brazil, 41 academic studies of APAC were found in the Catalogue of Theses and Dissertations of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, a foundation linked with the Ministry of Education, including 34 master’s dissertations and seven doctoral theses. APAC has attracted researchers from a wide variety of academic disciplines, encouraging a perspective that is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. The main fields of these studies are: law (7), sociology (6), administration (5), psychology (4), theology (4), economics (3), education (3), and regional development (2). We found only one study representing each of the following fields: integrated territory management, literature, public policy, anthropology, architecture, communication, and criminology. Among these, we analysed the 30 studies published and available in digital libraries.

An Innovative and Alternative Model?

The APAC model has been described as innovative (Ferreira, 2015; Silva, 2007; Vargas, 2011), and as a possible response in the area of restorative justice (Sacchetti, 2016; Silva, 2007). The implementation of APAC is interpreted by Vargas (2011, p. 224) as a pilot project that should be recognised as representative of progress in the prison system, despite the need for critique and adaptation.

APAC is described by Guerra (2014, p. 154) as worthwhile, and a feasible alternative to traditional prison practices. For Muhle (2013), ‘APAC is an efficient, cheap and humane alternative to serving the custodial sentence’ (p. 14). Vargas (2011) argues that if APAC can ensure that people do not become worse than when they arrived, it is already a solution that needs to be emphasised and that makes a difference in relation to the common prison model. In this sense, the model can be seen as a useful tool for the harm-reduction policy proposed by W. G. da Silva (2014), given how the prison system is structured – particularly in Brazil.

On the other hand, Resende (2013) critically argues that the APAC model does not favour the use of socially responsible alternatives; however, Resende does not specify exactly what these alternatives are. Alternative measures are rarely used in Brazil (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2015a), and they are used mainly for minor crimes. We see an international tendency to apply alternative penalties to situations that would not involve a prison sentence, with the possible effect of extending the web of social control rather than reducing incarceration (Aebi et al., 2015). This does not seem to be the case for the APAC model, however, because it receives prisoners who have already spent some time in prison with other people who are also serving a prison sentence. In this sense, in our analysis, the APAC model complements other alternatives rather than replacing them.

Contrary to what is commonly assumed, the recuperandos involved in the APAC units are not only petty thieves and drug traffickers, but people considered to be dangerous who have been given long prison sentences for offences such as homicide and rape. APAC prisoners are charged with the same crimes as ordinary prisoners (D. M. da Silva, 2007). In an APAC visit, the president explained that they prefer people with long sentences, because in these cases the unit has more time to work with these prisoners according to the model.

7 Exceptions were observed, as people not yet convicted were in the facilities due to the absence of a female prison. This situation can cause obvious problems, as some people do not accept the model of the prison and escaping from a CRS is relatively easy.
Social Reintegration Project

According to Ferreira (2015), an effective social reintegration treatment reduces the possibility that former prisoners will return to a life of crime. Resende (2013) argues that there is, effectively, a proposal for re-socialisation within the APAC structures, but he fears it may legitimise prisons. Carvalho (2016) also points out that recuperandos believe in the APAC method as an effective possibility of transformation. For Massola (2005) and Darke (2014), prisoners believe in the possibility of reintegration provided by APAC, in order to prevent committing new infractions; however, Massola also argues that APAC units are more focused on the characteristics of individuals than on the external society and the macro-level social forces that strongly influence the trajectories of those who return to society. This view, however, seems unnecessarily reductive, as we saw during our fieldwork period the effort APAC centres devote to educating the community, families, and the municipal authorities.

According to L. G. Oliveira (2012), the prisoners' narratives address recovery and returning to society, but it is possible that some of the recuperandos are simply fabricating identities for themselves within the units for opportunistic reasons. It is worth noting that sentenced persons respect for the model is essential for them to continue in the facility and for their progress, and their adherence to the model is seen as a sign of willingness to change. In this sense, it is not clear how much of this is a result of APAC's educational proposal itself, and how much is a consequence of evictions of prisoners who do not believe in the model.

The main studies analysing the APAC model also highlight the following: It stands out for its respect for human rights and its promotion of dignified treatment for prisoners and their families (Pasti, 2016; Resende, 2013; Vale, 2012; Vargas, 2011). Researchers reported on this humane and trustworthy treatment, as well as on the non-existence of vexing searches inside the units. Though in theory it would be illegal in Brazil, the invasive practice of physically searching people to avoid the entry of prohibited objects is still commonly adopted.

The APAC centres offer better material and symbolic conditions for the experience of people deprived of their freedom. The space is peaceful, and prisoners participate in the management of the centre, creating a potentially healthier environment for reintegration, as reported by Vargas (2011). Vargas (2011) and Massola (2005) note that prisoners also participate in the administration of the prison, which constitutes a specificity of the model—the rigid division (typically found in traditional prisons) between the guards and the people deprived of their freedom is eliminated (Oliveira, 2013). In APAC units, the role of maintaining discipline and preventing escape is also attributed to everyone inside the units generating a new organisation.

As mentioned previously, the main actors in APAC centres are the staff, the volunteers, and the prisoners themselves, completely changing aspects of an environment that is more typically dominated by uniformed prison guards, as reported in another APAC study by Massola (2005). The absence of uniforms in the APAC centres is analogous to one of the key steps in the major abolitionist reform that eliminated asylums in Italy (Babini, 2009). Armed agents are not admitted when the APAC model is fully applied. In the APAC experience studied by Massola (2005), there were still prison guards who, although not in continuous contact with the prisoners, created conflicts that resulted in transfers from the APAC system to the common system. The units we visited did not have armed prison guards, but it should be noted that some people from the security staff were former soldiers.

Formal and Informal Education, Professionalisation and Jobs

Regarding the activities found in the APAC proposal for social reintegration, Andrade (2015) and Coutinho (2009) point out that one of the differences between APAC and regular prisons is the quantity and quality of the activities offered to individuals with a prison sentence.

In the APAC model, education has a fundamental role in social reintegration. According to Rossato (2015), the option to serve a sentence in an APAC unit makes the prisoners a subject
of his or her path and increases the likelihood of success in adult education. The APAC model has been defined as an educational system, thanks to the construction of new morals through the global vision of the model, which considers all elements together (Rossato, 2015).

Unlike a traditional prison, where it is common to see permanent conflicts with the security staff that underestimate and undermine the educational area, the school in an APAC unit is seen as an important element, and relations among the school, staff and volunteers are more symmetrical and balanced than those in ordinary prisons (Vale, 2012). School time in prison units is often unpredictable because of the priority given to security and the internal needs of the units, which frequently do not consider education as a basic human right of the prisoner. In our experience, as in Vale (2012), the phenomenon of unpredictability is reduced in APAC centres, and classes usually take place on a regular basis. Nevertheless, precarious physical conditions of the school structure are also found in some APAC centres (Vale, 2012), in contexts where, in ordinary prisons, schools may not even exist. The practice of teachers is similar in both the studied APAC centres and the common prisons, with both using the same methodology and teaching plans (Vale, 2012).

In the APAC unit that was the object of Vale’s study, students and teachers had a good relationship, as was the case in the prison analysed in the same city. Of note, the teachers thought the students were more interested in the school in the context of the prison, this being an activity that opposes forced laziness, which was (in this case) not present in the APAC unit, which offered activities all day (Vale, 2012).

In their analyses of the educational aspect of APAC, C. M. M. da Silva (2014) and Vale (2012) found no concrete proposal of pedagogical policies. Coutinho (2009) observes that the APAC model has little emphasis on education. In another studied unit, no educational procedures were adopted developing intellectual work, criticism or political participation, according to C. M. M. da Silva (2014). In our observations, however, we could see that all the recuperandos who had not finished high school were studying in spaces that seemed trustworthy, despite being modest: I did not find the bars that exist in common prisons to signal the danger posed by prisoners. In our field experience, education and work were often emphasised and valued in the model, in which participants could take university courses online or in person.

Figure 1

*Classroom in an APAC centre in Sã o João Del-Rei, Minas Gerais*

*Note.* Meeting at APAC in São João Del-Rei, Minas Gerais. From *Cristiano Oliveira.* ([http://cristianosilveira.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2015.06.29-Apac-1.jpg](http://cristianosilveira.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/2015.06.29-Apac-1.jpg)) Copyright 2015 by...
Aline Margotti.

Another important aspect of social reintegration is having a professional qualification. Since APAC was first created, finding suitable employment for recuperandos has been a fundamental objective (Darke, 2014; Massola, 2001). In the APAC he analysed, employment had an eminently resocialising – not simply an economic – function.

Fuzatto (2008), a researcher and also the president of an APAC unit, highlights the good preparation for job search and better life prospects of the recuperandos in São João Del-Rei when compared to those offered by a conventional prison model (p.71). When analysing the APAC in Viçosa, Tomé (2011) found that professionalisation workshops (carpentry, baking, vegetable gardening, and handicraft work) contributed to the qualifications and professionalisation of recuperandos, who worked primarily in the fields in which they were trained during their time in the CRS. However, the recuperandos demanded more variety in their training, which they felt could connect them with the labour market more successfully. This underscored that the biggest problem was still related to prejudice on the part of the hiring companies (Tomé, 2011). Similarly, Coutinho (2009), analysing an APAC unit and the prison in the same location, reported more professionalisation activities in APAC, but observed that these actions did not necessarily guarantee a job nor a successful recovery for the former recuperandos. The conclusion of Coutinho’s analysis of this CRS was that professional training did not effectively meet the demands of the labour market (2009).

Maximiano (2014) found CRS programs that looked like those in the common prison system, and consequently argued that there is no effective professional qualification in APAC. While studying other units, C. M. M. da Silva (2014) also found that professional qualification policies were weak and inoperative, without actions for the effective implementation of professional qualification policies, and that the recuperandos did not know whether they would be hired later by private entrepreneurs. In this regard, C. M. M. da Silva (2014) concluded that APAC jobs are very similar to those developed in the American prison system. Because the recuperandos do not learn an activity that effectively allows them to enter the labour market, they are pushed into self-employment, informal work, underemployment, or even unemployment (C. M. M. da Silva, 2014). This situation was also found in our study during the fieldwork we performed between 2017 and 2019, when unemployment was high. In any event, we observed that APAC units offered more jobs when compared to the common prison system in Brazil, in which jobs are usually available for a very limited number of people. There are also administrative meetings (open, semi-open, and closed systems) and cell meetings, in which people discuss the problems they face in the units, and which can provide organisational skills.

Coutinho (2009) highlights the problems of former recuperandos in the labour market, arguing that, despite professional training, few of them assume a role in the formal labour market, performing instead only unskilled, informal activities. Even though some companies offer jobs to former prisoners, it is not sufficient to meet the demand. Vargas (2011) also addresses the problem of limited work alternatives offered to former prisoners. This difficult access to the formal labour market increases the gap concerning the illegal labour market which, by exercising stronger power over people, can ultimately reduce the possibility of social reintegration. It is worth noting Ottoboni’s (2014) related argument that APAC units should have all their employees trained by former recuperandos, some of whom are already represented in positions of authority in both APAC and the FBAC.

At this point, it is important to pause and reflect on how reintegration becomes a macropolitical issue in regard to high unemployment rates. Training, education and professionalisation may not be enough to face such a problematic economic situation.

One of the ideas concerning informal education in the APAC social reintegration proposal aims to break the traditional prison’s code of honour among prisoners: Recuperandos should not engage in violence or use the prison’s typical language and slang; at the same time,
they should help with the managing of cell keys – a task that is viewed very negatively in the traditional prison’s culture, and which is identified as an assignment of the prison guards (Oliveira, 2013). This is based on the idea of ‘the survival of the fittest’ – meaning, those who collaborate with the agents of authority can be put to death for becoming ‘pariahs’ who, inside the prison, help the guards and faithfully follow the regulations imposed by them (Oliveira, 2013).

Self-control is required to break the traditional code of honour, thereby obtaining increased responsibilities and benefits. In the CRS analysed by Massola (2005), the prisoners considered themselves different from the prisoners incarcerated in common prisons because the APAC recuperandos no longer respected the code of honour for prisoners who, for example, demanded death for rapists and paedophiles. In our study, we found no isolated safe sections in the APAC centres reserved for people who could be subject to violence in the common areas, thereby reinforcing the idea that those in the CRS should get used to living together without violence.

The need to respect and enforce internal rules is also a responsibility of those living in a CRS. For example, in the traditional prison community, caguetagem (whistleblowing) is regarded as a crime and is condemned by the prison community, but in the APACs it is seen as a sign of adherence to the model. By considering caguetagem as an act for which the recuperandos share responsibility, the APAC model confronts one of the fundamental rules of the traditional prison’s code of honour, where such infractions are condemned (Oliveira, 2013). Consequently, in CRSs, those who report infractions are perceived as ‘committed’ and can be permitted access to a position of leadership and responsibility as they are proving to be trustworthy. These recuperandos who demonstrate their commitment to the APAC model, as they are placed in leadership positions in the units, have the effect of generating an inverted hierarchy of authority (Oliveira, 2013). In this way, the code of honour remains in place for only some of the prisoners, which makes the work of the ‘committed’ ones all the more difficult.

For the reasons given above, it is not surprising that the APAC model results in a culture that is completely different from that which is fostered by the code of honour in place in traditional prisons, as observed by Muhle (2013) and Oliveira (2013). The resulting social identity is positive, but it is not known whether [the recuperandos] are merely reproducing discourses for convenience (L. G. Oliveira, 2012). Massola (2001) argues that the APAC model’s intentional breaking of the traditional code of honour results in certain interruptions of the prison culture, but some patterns persist. In the unit I analysed, vestiges of the traditional prison subculture had not disappeared completely, though they were moderate and had been partially modified by the CRS. In APAC, for example, recuperandos were not allowed to punish violations of the code of honour excessively, and in particular, impositions of the death penalty upon fellow recuperandos were forbidden (Massola, 2005).

Re-entry into Society, Recidivism, and Stigma

The APAC model stands out, according to L. G. Oliveira (2012), for its concern about the post-prison moment. This is certainly true during the penal execution process, as the model allows a gradual return to society, enabling a life of external work while serving one’s sentence. However, the two APAC units we visited did not have a structured procedure for people who had served their sentences but could not find a job or a home. Possible problems when returning to society (for example, looking for a job and a house) could perhaps be solved through informal contacts with representatives of the APAC centres, but this service was not organically planned.

Returning to society remains a major challenge for some recuperandos after leaving their APAC units. One reason for this is that there is a poor follow-up of former prisoners. In the period of observation, we noted that employment agreements for recuperandos with the local municipalities were of limited duration for individuals leaving the penal system. This was also reported by Vargas (2011). By the time recuperandos are released from a centre, APAC’s
assumption is that they are already socialised and are undergoing the gradual process of release from incarceration; however, this does not always happen. An exception seems to be the APAC unit in Itaúna, which FBAC headquarters manage, and which has had better results in this regard. This APAC is more rooted in its local society, making it possible for several companies to offer jobs to recuperandos (Vargas, 2011).

Muhle (2013) and Coutinho (2009) report that the stigma associated with recuperandos is lower than that of prisoners in general. Through their involvement in the local society, this stigma is disrupted, and a better reception is generated, according to Silva (2007). Companies that employ former prisoners contribute to reducing the social stigma, as reported by Coutinho (2009). Prejudice does remain, but according to Guerra (2014), the recuperandos are viewed differently from traditional ex-convicts. This is because the process of breaking social relations that we see in the typical system is avoided by the APAC model, and there is an effort to maintain links with the family (Tomé, 2011, p. 94). Vargas (2011) admits that stigma is reduced inside APAC units, but that it returns in strength when recuperandos leave them. Belonging to religious groups, which is encouraged by APAC, can re-signify prisoners’ identities and help them overcome social stigmatisation, thereby providing a network that can also offer them employment opportunities (Tomé, 2011; Vargas, 2011). When reviewing the analysis Tomé (2011) conducted on the life trajectories of recuperandos from the CRS in Viçosa, we can see that stigma and prejudice still influence them as well – and their path in the units does not guarantee that the stigma will be broken.

Recidivism rates, though difficult to compare, must be taken into consideration when evaluating the success of social reintegration models. Reports of a 70% recidivism rate should be discussed, because this figure includes people who may not be convicted later; likewise, in Brazil the percentage of people placed in preventive custody rather than sentenced to prison is high. The most accurate study, even if conducted with limited numbers, reports a recidivism rate between 20% and 50% in the Brazilian context (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2015b). As there is no clear methodology regarding recidivism in the APAC model, several methodological problems are observed: For example, the recuperandos may commit a crime in another state and, in that case, would not be counted as recidivist offenders (Ferreira, 2015).

Additionally, to compare the two percentages, it would be necessary to understand the significance of the impact on prisoners of the selection for APAC admission and length of stay. Although the model claims not to select people with good discipline, it should be maintained in the units once people enter. In addition, it is mandatory that recuperandos remain in the CRS to be involved in work, study, and order-management activities in the units that may exclude several people – for example, people who have no intention of desisting from criminal acts. People who respect traditional criminal ethics, for example, do not ask for a transfer to an APAC unit (Augusto, 2016; Darke, 2014). Despite the few interviews conducted by Fuzatto (2008), the people who had been admitted to the APAC unit analysed had more positive experiences with families than had people in regular prisons. The primary socialisation process and life stories of people who have been in APAC centres were, therefore, more favourable in this studied unit (Fuzatto, 2008). This may also happen in other units.

Conclusion

Research shows that people in the APAC model believe in reintegration, although the extent to which this belief is due to opportunistic dynamics or to the eviction of people who do not adhere to the model remains unclear. Formal education is mandatory, and is seen as a priority; also, no problems regarding the availability of vacancies have been reported. Research seems to suggest that the APAC model does have an impact on recidivism rates, although we must stay on the side of caution before drawing premature conclusions until further research is conducted.

The APAC model seems to offer more professionalising activities than do traditional
prisons in Brazil. In some APAC units, these activities may lead to the insertion of *recuperandos* in the labour market; in other units, however, this does not seem to be the case, where re-entry into society is difficult and aggravated by the persistence of stereotypes.

The educational perspective that is integral to the APAC model is also noteworthy. This can be seen in both overt and subtle ways – for example, in the absence of armed agents both inside and outside the centres (despite the presence of prisoners considered highly dangerous), amid the pleasing aesthetics of the centre’s environment, seems to ensure more respect for the rights of the *recuperandos*. Continuous exchanges with society and relationships with the outside world are described as excellent; also, the phenomenon of staff without uniforms is reminiscent of the results of the deinstitutionalisation of asylums in Italy.

Family relationships are less affected by residence in a CRS, and research shows the possibility of rebuilding social ties according to the proposed APAC model. Such strengthening of relationships can be compromised, however, if volunteers or interns lacking sufficient education are used to engage in this work, as we observed in some units. In addition, the CRS has certain unique protocols that (at least in theory) may break the traditional prison code of honour, while in actual practice the possibility of representing a cultural transformation for opportunistic purposes remains.

The APAC model is also recommended as a response in the area of restorative justice, providing a concrete example in support of the idea that society can be educated for a response that is not merely punitive. Also, studies describe the model as alternative and innovative, as it accomplishes a project originally planned but not actually accomplished, as Foucault reminds us. The proposal can represent an alternative model to traditional imprisonment in Brazil – and possibly in the world – although it needs to be improved in a number of ways. This alternative applies uniquely to people who have received a prison sentence and, therefore, does not currently seem to apply to people who might benefit from other approaches. APAC is also a model for reducing prison damage (whether to property or human resources), and it is also recommended as a possible public security policy based on the social inclusion (rather than exclusion) of prisoners; however, this, too, requires further research.

In spite of all that would seem to commend the APAC model in terms of its potential benefits, several issues remain. These include limitations in terms of post-prison follow-up to help people find a job and a home after leaving the unit. Unemployment and lack of jobs seem to be problems inherent in any reintegration project (not only the APAC model), making it difficult for people to enter the labour market.

Evidence suggests that the APAC model represents a reintegration proposal that can partially overcome reintegration practices – such as bureaucratic marketing (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 1999), breaching of the dynamics of total institution (Goffman, 1961), and social stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963) – and go beyond the basic disciplinary and production dynamics of simple, docile bodies as described by Foucault (1975). The attainment of these ends is proposed through educational planning involving prisoners, volunteers, schools, institutions, and the greater society.

The APAC model is not a method to overcome the prison system itself, but it can be an alternative tool to help overcome the problems of the prison system reported in the sociological literature, such as criminal selectivity and the cultivation of the career criminal.
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Bridging a Gap of Understanding: A Model of Experiential Learning for Incarcerated Students and Non-Incarcerated Undergraduates

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Abstract: Service learning has evolved as a primary experience-based curriculum for undergraduate students. But much of what universities put forward as service learning is not a genuine engagement with community partners to help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. In this paper, we outline our preliminary attempt to do just that—what we call The Bridge Model. The discussion that follows occurs in the context of a semester-long project between undergraduate students at a Midwestern University (MU) and incarcerated participants from the university’s prison education program. First, we briefly situate the partnership in terms of its theoretical background in experiential learning and focus on critical service learning. Second, we explain the nature of our collaboration in terms of its aims and framework. Third, we position our Bridge model as a helpful alternative on a continuum with another prominent form of alliance—the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Fourth, we provide project samples that typify our model. Fifth, we outline the value of our approach to service learning using data derived from student reflection papers and lay out some of the challenges we faced in the project’s implementation. Finally, we contemplate the road ahead.

Keywords: experiential learning, community engagement, service learning, Inside-Out

Experiential learning is an enduring component of undergraduate education across disciplines. John Dewey (1938) believed education was best achieved through experience rather than strictly classroom knowledge. Service learning has evolved as a primary experience-based curriculum for students. Many service learning projects do not require or permit students to have direct experience with social inequalities. For example, students working with feeding programs are engaged in charity work rather than directly confronting poverty by working with poor people (Stoecker, 2016). As Pompa (2002) writes, “service-learning—different from charity—involves becoming conscientious of and able to critique social systems, motivating participants to analyze what they experience while inspiring them to take action and make change” (p. 75). Much of what universities put forward as service learning is not a genuine engagement with community partners to help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. In this paper, we outline our preliminary attempt to do just that—what we call The Bridge Model.

The discussion that follows occurs in the context of a semester-long project between undergraduate students at a Midwestern University (MU) and incarcerated participants from the university’s prison education program. First, we briefly situate the partnership in terms of its theoretical background in experiential learning and focus on critical service learning. Sec-
ond, we explain the nature of our collaboration in terms of its aims and framework. Third, we position our Bridge model as a helpful alternative on a continuum with another prominent form of alliance—the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Fourth, we provide project samples that typify our model. Fifth, we outline the value of our approach to service learning using data derived from student reflection papers and lay out some of the challenges we faced in the project’s implementation. Finally, we contemplate the road ahead.

Theoretical Background

As with any educational partnership, ours is a product of our backgrounds, experiences, and discipline-specific knowledge. The interdisciplinary nature of our project (combining tenets from sociology, philosophy, and education) has challenged us to navigate differences in language and perspective that stem from each branch of academic inquiry. While no translation will be perfect, we have found that many ostensible differences between these branches speak to the same ideas. And though the various approaches to experiential learning are often listed separately in academic texts for conceptual clarity, we’ve found that experiential learning in practice often plays out in different combinations—and on multiple levels (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

Thus, in terms of our pedagogical approach, our collaboration is experiential learning on one level and (project-based) service learning on another level. On the level of experience, we simply brought our students together to explore the power of open and honest dialogue. But our collaboration sought to accomplish more. On the level of service-learning, our project partners also spent a majority of their time together engaging in individual collaborative projects, for which students planned, created, and (in some cases) implemented something in the world concerning some issue of social justice.

Stoecker (2016) criticizes the practice of experiential learning that focuses on college students’ wants and needs rather than expanding the knowledge base of community partners. He posits that knowledge is power, and that a better way to support social change is by increasing community partners’ knowledge base. Stoecker (2016) underscores the need to liberate service learning by prioritizing social justice for the community and not supporting the student needs first.

Mitchell (2008) suggests that service learning is:

A community service tied to learning goals and ongoing reflection about the experience. The learning in service-learning results from the connections students make between their experiences and course themes. Through their community service, students become active learners, bringing skills and information about community work and integrating them with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge. At the same time, students’ classroom learning informs their service to the community…Critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice. (pp. 50-51)

Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law (2012) advocate for critical service learning to tackle the “whiteness” of many universities’ experiential learning approaches. Service projects are often from a white benevolence perspective rather than focusing on social justice for community citizens—what Pompa (2002) might call “patronization.” Service learners are coming from a position of relative privilege as university students. The pedagogy used in the classroom often reinforces students’ centrality and their needs versus critical engagement with and empowerment of community partners through service initiatives (Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker, 2016). Castro and Gould (2018) refer to this type of exchange as academic tourism: “using higher education in prison as a way to benefit the learning experience of the non-incarcerated
undergraduate students” (p. 6).

Taking cues from these authors, we seek to provide a service learning experience that strikes a balance between the benefits accrued to incarcerated students and those accrued to non-incarcerated students. We strive to cultivate an understanding, that is, that attends to the dignity, needs, and desires of both the incarcerated and non-incarcerated students (Allred, 2009; Castro & Gould, 2018) while putting a priority on expanding the knowledge base of our community partners.

**Reflections**

The discussion of our Bridge model for service learning projects is indeed a reflection of ourselves as teacher-scholars. Our analysis and report of our findings employ qualitative methods of participant observation, engagement in conversation with our students, and a narrative assessment of students’ critical reflections. In keeping with qualitative research, we provide reflexive statements to locate ourselves within the project and elaborate on our engagement with our respective students. We identify ourselves as Author 1 (A1) and Author 2 (A2).

**Author 1 Reflections**

Like too many others, I grew up in poverty with alcoholic and abusive parents. I left my household as soon as I could, spending many years as a wayward soul. In many ways, I was untethered from society and could have easily ended up as a participant in the justice system. As a result of luck and privilege, I reconnected with higher education as an adult learner, benefitting greatly from its transformative powers. Such powers allow me, in part, to recognize suffering and injustice in others. My experience as an adult learner who came from poverty, one who genuinely cares about issues of social justice, has helped foster meaningful discussions and classroom experiences with incarcerated individuals. These characteristics have partly, but of course not wholly, helped bridge significant racial and carceral divides between the incarcerated and me.

A prison warden once asked me if I ever thought that I would teach in prison. The truth is that I never thought I would be teaching anyone anywhere, given my upbringing. I was a terrible student in high school—a wayward youth, to put it in a misleadingly endearing sort of way. Mostly, I was not too fond of the day in and day out of school. The traditional experience, I felt, was intensely and utterly dull. My education was primarily a dogmatic, lecture-style indoctrination led by passive instructors. I was introduced to an active, participatory-style learning experience when I returned to college many years later. And I remain convinced that experiential learning is superior to conventional instruction methods—or, at the very least, a powerful supplement to them.

**Author 2 Reflections**

This project came about as an extension of other teaching and research that I developed over time to keep instruction fresh and relevant for undergraduate students. I have engaged in curriculum development to create and expand experiential learning for my department’s undergraduate majors, including service learning, internships, community-based research, and study abroad. I have engaged my students in a variety of service learning projects for over 15 years. My service instruction has changed a great deal over the years, moving from a co-curricular, volunteer/charity type of model to focusing increasingly on inclusion and striving for social justice. Stoeker’s (2016) and Mitchell’s (2008) work provides a great deal of interest and a challenge for me. I reconsidered how I might genuinely make a community-driven service-learning course and provide real engagement and collaboration between MU students and a community partner.

My scholarship is influenced and informed by convict criminology, which focuses on the words, experiences, and insights from formerly incarcerated persons (Tietjen, 2019). Con-
vict criminology elevates incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals’ voices to be the primary sources of knowledge about justice-involved people’s experiences. Outside scholars and activists play a role in advocating but not creating the theory. I use the service learning engagement as a means by which traditional undergraduates and students inside a correctional facility may engage in a mutual exchange of ideas without privileging the voices of university students.

One of the challenges for me has been how to bring justice-involved people into a service-learning project with undergraduate students. I became aware that A1 was providing college-level non-credit courses at a men’s correctional facility. I reached out to him to see if there might be interest in a service-learning project with my undergraduate students in a corrections class. Together, we launched the following pilot project.

The Nature of the Collaboration

For a 15-week semester, ten students from a MU undergraduate course taught by A2 worked on an experiential learning project with 13 participants from a medium-security prison in a Midwestern state. The incarcerated individuals involved in the collaborative group were a subset of a larger group of participants from A1’s philosophy course at the correctional facility called Education and Human Flourishing. The group of incarcerated learners comprised males between the ages of 25 and 65, of whom six were Black, two were LatinX, and five were White. The group of non-incarcerated learners comprised four males and six females, all of whom were white and between 18 and 45.

Before we began the process of writing about this collaboration, we sought clarification from our institution’s IRB on whether we needed to pursue a full consent protocol. The IRB informed us that since we were drawing upon anonymous data from critical reflection papers in an effort to improve instruction and means of collaboration, our project did not meet the federal definition of research and as such did not require IRB oversight. That said, we were careful during the entire process not only to explain the nature and possible implications of the collaboration, but also to seek incarcerated students’ permission to continue and, most importantly, to shape the project itself. A1 made it clear that participation in the collaboration was completely voluntary and opting out would not impact incarcerated students’ grades or standing in the course.

The outside students are not required to participate in a service learning project for A2’s class. A variety of service projects are offered, or a final paper may be completed. The students who indicated an interest in the project met with A2 to discuss the need for confidentiality within the group to protect the privacy of the inside students. A2 also explained that any students participating in the project would be subject to a criminal background check before they would be allowed to enter the prison. A2 assured them that none of the information would be shared with either instructor and the student could still complete the collaborative project without the visit. If a student was flagged by the background check or opted out at the last minute, “I have to work” or “something came up” were suggested as acceptable reasons by A2 as a means of preventing embarrassment. The outside students were also required to present their service project papers to the MU class. The students worked together to share their experiences and did not share personal identifiers about their inside student collaborators.

Near the end of the collaboration, A1 obtained explicit written permission from some of the incarcerated participants to share their project ideas and reflections publicly. Thus, the four project examples used in the “Sample of Project Collaboration” section (below) were drawn directly from those students’ writings on what they wanted to be shared generally. Since we did not engage in the collaboration with the primary goal of publishing on it, A1 left it open as to the nature of the public offering (e.g., presentation, publication in academic journal, publication on website, etc.). The incarcerated participants were notified that one of the goals of the collaboration was to improve future collaborations between incarcerated and non-incarcerated
students and that publishing is one way that we might accomplish this goal.

These precautions notwithstanding, we’ve come to appreciate the value of a more formalized consent process. Whether or not IRB protocols are required and whether or not we intend to write on future collaborations, we plan on implementing a more rigorous procedure for notifying individuals about the possible risks and benefits of their participation, as well as broadening our procedure for obtaining permission about what their participation might entail.

After A2 proposed the project, the two instructors and the respective student groups set about planning the various aspects of the collaboration. A1 discussed the possible collaboration with his students, after which he obtained their permission to share their preliminary ideas with the outside students. Our aims, listed below, derived from that initial conversation with the inside students. They serve as acceptable primary considerations for projects that seek to promote real engagement between community partners in the orbit of American criminal justice. We’d like to note, however, that such considerations may also apply to other types of projects that help advance meaningful social change to address social problems. At any rate, such endeavors need to

- involve a genuine collaboration—a project with each respective group, not just on or about them;
- aim at benefitting both groups, as well as the community and society as a whole (e.g., the projects would address some social issue and be made public in some format); and
- humanize those in the other group, and not just see and stereotype them as the “other”—as a criminal or a convict or a police officer or a corrections official.

The inside students did not receive instruction on this topic; it is interesting to see how well their preliminary list of aims lined up with other guidelines found in the literature surrounding experiential learning and higher education in prison (cf. Pompa, 2002; Pollack, 2014).

The aims listed above were the initial guide for the collaboration. The framework for the model was flexible, given the pilot nature of our engagement. We are aware of the differences between our initial framework, its overall aims, and the particular collaborations that emerged. While the next group of student-planners will surely develop a different set of particular collaborations, we don’t foresee the aims or framework changing drastically between cohorts. Under our framework, the collaborative learning experience

- must be in the vein of participatory action research (PAR);
- must be project-based;
- will likely be correspondence-heavy; and
- must have a face-to-face component.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) tell us that the ultimate goal of participatory action research is “to engage people in taking action on their behalf as a part of their communities” (p. 58). Unfolding in an iterative four-stage process (reflection, planning, action, and observation) PAR can act as a bridge between the acquisition of academic knowledge and self- and community-transformation (Frank et al., 2012). We removed the official research component, but the projects remained firmly exploratory and entailed student- and stakeholder-involved planning and shared decision-making. Because we chose to focus on student autonomy and building individual relationships, we used one-on-one project-based collaborations. And because the partnership was meant to supplement, and not supplant, the existing courses on sociology and philosophy, respectively, we settled on weekly written correspondences and at least one face-to-face meeting.

With these ideas in mind, the instructors used biographies written by all student participants to match students with similar interests. However, we encouraged the incarcerated
students to select their project partners actively. Both the inside and outside students were encouraged to develop what might be possible project ideas on which they could work together. While the framework crystallized, the students spent several weeks writing back and forth to each other, sharing project ideas, and getting to know each other as people. And they navigated the difficulties of communicating between the two institutions. We strived to provide structure but also limited our intervention to direct the projects. As the semester churned on, the students refined their project ideas and set about working on them, looking ahead to the correctional facility’s face-to-face meeting.

As the day of the visit approached, the outside students seemed to have a few questions and concerns, but nothing would indicate any serious problems. We traveled separately to the facility and gathered in the waiting area. The first challenge the students encountered was the movement through the security check. While they “knew what to expect,” they were not necessarily ready for a pat-down search and the removal of shoes. One student was visibly uncomfortable and nervous about this process, and the others became quieter. Once we were through security and started moving across the open campus, the outside students began to loosen up a bit and seemed surprised by the surroundings. One student said it looked “a bit like a retirement community,” while others commented that it looked like a community college.

We entered a building that looks pretty much like any other classroom. When the inside students came in, it was quiet for a few minutes. Everyone was looking at one another, trying to figure out who was who. All the students seemed ready to start putting a face to a name they knew from letters. We started the afternoon with an ice-breaking exercise to get to know one another, and then the students were able to work more collaboratively in small groups. We moved around engaging with the students. A1 had more responsibilities to keep the groups on the topic and track. A2 had more leisure to roam around a bit more, watch body language, listen in on multiple conversations, and just generally observe what was happening. While only a subset of the inside students had outside partners, most inside students joined the various discussion groups. A few older men stood or watched from the side of the room. When asked if they wanted to join in, they smiled and said they were happy just to listen and watch. One man stated, “I am happy to have all these young people here who want to talk with us. That’s good that you did this” (speaking to A2).

Contrasting our Model with the Inside-Out Model

One prominent collaboration model for bringing together non-incarcerated college students and incarcerated individuals is the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Under this model, a higher education representative (usually a professor) brings around 15 (Outside) college students to a jail or prison once a week to participate in a college course with approximately 15 (Inside) incarcerated individuals. Inside-Out courses focus broadly on social justice issues and aim to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between the two groups. The Inside-Out model “affords students a total immersion” and provides them with “direct, unadulterated exposure to the exigencies of a particular context” (Pompa, 2002, p. 68).

We argue that our Bridge model of experiential learning is a semi-novel and fruitful way to engage in meaningful collaboration between our respective students. In the effort to promote real engagement between community partners to help advance significant social change to address social problems, we see our Bridge model as an alternative to Inside-Out and other such programs—but not necessarily in competition with them. We see our service learning projects as being on a continuum of collaborative experiences with justice-involved adults and youth. We aren’t attempting to replicate or replace Inside-Out-type programs; we are looking at alternative opportunities for engagement between the different groups that provide exchanges of knowledge and collaboration that each of the participants can carry forward in their personal and professional lives. Justice-involved participants gain insight and experiences to reenter society and utilize their knowledge for positive change. University students move on
with their ability to inform their coursework, activities, and professional work.

While we don’t take issue with the Inside-Out Program as such, we suggest there are at least four main reasons for considering our alternate model of collaboration given our experience and the aims and framework outlined above. First, beyond the immediate benefits of mixing inside and outside students, it is unclear whether a one-on-one dynamic is significantly better or worse than a whole-group approach. Our understanding is that Inside-Out courses operate primarily on a mix of small group and extensive group discussion. By contrast, our model takes on a more one-on-one-type approach, though we still incorporate small and large group discussion in our face-to-face meetings, just as we did during our collaboration. The Inside-Out program focuses mainly on the integration of the two groups, completing a group project aimed at social justice near the end of each course; our model emphasizes the project itself.

Second, given the difficulties of establishing a course that meets weekly in prison, our hybrid approach (e.g., some in-person meetings, lots of written correspondence) might allow for more overall collaboration. Our model is not dependent on a college or university instructor securing the training and funding necessary to run a course specifically for the Inside-Out program. A2’s class is offered regularly to undergraduates at MU. The class has a stable enrollment over time and is not likely to be subject to cancellation due to low enrollment. Instructor training for the Inside-Out program can cost thousands of dollars (Training, n.d.). Though our model might require more time for the instructors than a traditional college course, it does not require many more resources. Inside-Out may not be affordable and/or feasible for most students. With limited resources and time, our model seeks to provide an opportunity to engage, inform, and empower people toward social justice endeavors.

Third, our more direct interdisciplinary approach might yield synergies not found in some Inside-Out programs, typically focused on single subject areas related to issues of crime, social justice, etc. A1’s course at the correctional facility was on the topic of Education and Human Flourishing. It covered a range of philosophical issues such as happiness, well-being, human flourishing, moral character, the phenomenology of virtue, and so on. It is worth noting that the course did cover the aims of higher education in prison. Some of the projects, including a character workshop (see project example below), draw more on the inside course than the outside curriculum. The point is that this decision was left to the individual collaborators and might not have come about without this interdisciplinary approach.

The fourth reason is more practical. Certainly now, amidst the global health crisis brought about by Covid-19, it seems worth thinking through the benefits of a more correspondence-heavy service-learning experience. In an Inside Higher Education article, Bard Prison Program director Max Kenner was quoted as saying that “the ethical obligation to leave and not be responsible for introducing the virus into these institutions was clear as day. [But] how we go back will not be clear as day” (Burke, 2020). Prison education programs around the country have radically transformed in the wake of the pandemic. The few programs with the means to utilize technology did so, others with resources switched to a correspondence model, while many others suspended their operations indefinitely. Immediately, it is worth clarifying that we do not wish to advocate for a complete correspondence model because there must be some face-to-face engagement to facilitate a deeper connection between collaboration partners. But until we can ensure the safety of our students and instructors, consideration of a correspondence-heavy model seems prudent.

One main problem with both our collaboration model and the Inside-Out model is that it is often the case that the inside students do not receive credits. In contrast, Outside students typically do receive credits. In both cases, this has to do with the difficulty of raising tuition dollars for the incarcerated students, who are barred from receiving federal funding in the form of Pell Grants. It also has to do with the difficulties of working through the bureaucracy of higher education institutions to get additional sites the proper accreditation. The benefits of
earning even some college credits (to say nothing of earning a degree) while incarcerated have been well documented (see Davis et al., 2013; Karpowitz, 2017; Lagemann, 2016). While some programs run entirely on private monies, most programs find it challenging to pay students’ tuition. It is safe to say securing funding and accreditation is a necessary goal of any higher education in prison program.

Sample of Project Collaborations

To get a sense of how the framework and aims of our collaboration played out in practice, we highlight some of the students’ projects. As mentioned above, the partnerships were project-based, where the goal was to produce (at least) a plan to create something tangible. Of course, the dialogue and the projects were central aspects of the experience. Still, they were in service of the three main aims of our service learning model: to work as equal partners in creating something of benefit for them and their community while humanizing the other participant in the process. Our data come from critical reflection papers completed by students and also from the instructors’ notes on the project.

**Project Collaboration 1, “Let’s Reform. Let’s Be Responsible.”** The project partners created a prison reform and accountability questionnaire for distribution via Facebook group chat for friends and fellow community members. Participants could go “more in-depth with their thinking and how they feel when it comes to…investing their care, concern, time, and effort toward reform.” The partners hope to build a grassroots movement to hold officials accountable for their actions and incarceration policies. They are mainly concerned with long and indeterminate sentences and the economics of incarceration. As for his overall experience with the collaboration, one inside student writes:

> What became concrete in this MU collaborative experience was gaining an inside-outside perspective and showing that those who are serving time under punishment can work collectively and productively with students from society, forecasting that education is beneficial for the incarcerated too. What was provided was the ability to learn from each other, where common ground was found, where empathy was reached, and where a better more well-rounded understanding became ours. Overall, the very thought of working with actual campus students heightened the desire, the engagement, and the mental stimulation while learning (F, Inside Student).

In other words, the project experience was a genuine collaboration and a humanizing experience, which benefitted both parties (and aimed to help the community).

**Project Collaboration 2, “Character Workshop.”** With this collaboration, the project partners proposed a character workshop for and co-facilitated by incarcerated and non-incarcerated people. The workshop’s goal would be to facilitate positive moral change in each person who chooses to participate. About the project, the inside participant wrote:

> The hope is that each person that finishes this workshop can become inspirations and role models whether they are going back to their communities or their cells…If we want to see true change it must start with us, then our families, our communities, and society as a whole. (J, Inside Student)

The workshop would unfold in three stages: assigned readings on moral character to be completed individually, discussions about the tasks to be completed in incarcerated/non-incarcerated pairings, and an individual reflection paper.

**Project Collaboration 3, “Fair, Smart, and Proportionate Sentencing Reform.”** For this collaboration, the project partners worked toward creating a set of talking points for discussions with Michigan elected officials on the subject of sentencing reform. D, an inside student, writes

> The fact is that most people believe in some sort of punishment. But where
most people differ is in how to dole out that punishment and what rights should remain for our incarcerated citizens, such as the right to higher education, questions as to should their families have to pay extremely high prices for phone calls, [whether] proximity to home [should] be considered when deciding where one is incarcerated, [whether] rehabilitation [should] be the driving force or mere punishment.

This collaboration pair has embodied the aims of true collaboration, multi-party beneficiaries, and humanization and directed them squarely at the issue of sentencing reform. They aimed to tackle thorny philosophical problems with well-reasoned arguments and transform those arguments into bit-sized policy positions. At the semester’s end, the pair were gathering data to support and refine their platform.

**Project Collaboration 4.** The collaboration pair created a podcast episode to highlight the impact of higher education for similarly situated incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, using oral history as their chosen medium. E writes that:

> My collaboration partner and I believe that [the incarcerated/non-incarcerated binary] is an important contrast that can be used to illustrate the value of higher education to demonstrate how everyone’s lives—incarcerated or not—are impacted and transformed by the experience [of education].

While some of the projects aimed at specific issues related to incarceration and American criminal justice, this collaboration’s central aspect had to do with the transformative powers of education. Using the variables of age, socio-economic status, and incarcerated/free citizenship status, they planned to let individuals tell their own story of how education has changed their lives.

**The Value of the Bridge Model**

The project examples above serve to demonstrate the value of our approach to service learning: that it can facilitate a deep understanding between various actors typically on opposite ends of a spectrum—in our case, the criminal justice system. On one side of this system, non-incarcerated undergraduates receive formal education in preparation for careers in fields such as law enforcement, corrections, legal and paralegal positions, probation, and the like. On the other side, incarcerated students convicted of violating, or allegedly violating, some aspect of the law. Early on in our collaboration, it became clear that both groups had little knowledge or understanding of the other’s experience.

The vast majority of people fundamentally misunderstand incarceration—our non-incarcerated participants were no exception. Link (2016) points out that, “the core of the traditional American criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c’s—cops, courts, and corrections” as well as “a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of [a student’s] major or minor” (p. 50). What this curriculum misses, she goes on to say, “is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with” (Link, 2016, p. 50). Even if we were all to agree that people deserved to be incarcerated as a proper punishment for their convictions, we might think differently about what exactly is deserved if we knew what the experience was like—not just of being incarcerated, but also of moving through various points in the justice system. Conversely, understanding students’ motivations for studying criminal justice or corrections could benefit those on the punitive end of those fields of study and practice. It is the case that most incarcerated individuals have never had a relationship (to say nothing of a positive relationship) with, say, law enforcement or corrections officials apart from those experienced within the system. Positive peer interactions in this context can foster mutual understanding and respect between the two groups (Link, 2016).

The balance of this section engages with outside students’ critical reflections on the
collaboration to further demonstrate how genuine engagement with community partners helps advance meaningful social change. At this point, we’d like to reiterate that our partnership seeks to strike a balance between the benefits accrued to incarcerated individuals and those accrued to non-incarcerated individuals. We believe that it is at once possible to avoid the academic tourism described by Castro and Gould (2018) and the patronization described by Pompa (2002) and attend to the needs, dignity, and desires of students, incarcerated or not.

Several of the students noted that the process of writing to and then meeting the inside students was truly eye-opening. For many students, this was the first time they had ever entered a correctional facility. One of the students reported working with formerly incarcerated people in the community, but not inside an institution. One observation made by students was that they were surprised by the level of intellectual engagement, curiosity, and intelligence they heard from the inside students. One student states:

The men in this class all had a desire for learning and making themselves become better in ways they didn’t believe could happen. I found it very interesting on how excited they all were to express their opinions on different topics given to them. When learning that these prisoners are doing readings and then also given homework, it surprised me. I did not ever think of a prisoner having homework, this to me shows that these men are not just there to serve a sentence but are also there to help make themselves more intelligent and learn off the other prisoners in the class.

Another student reflects:

Having the ability to have these conversations with [inside student, D] was incredibly eye-opening. [D], despite being incarcerated for many years, communicated and held himself in a demeanor that I certainly did not expect going into this project. I was surprised and delighted to find out that I would have many intelligent conversations with him. The thing that stuck out the most to me, however, was his overwhelming desire to learn, along with the rest of his class at the facility.

A further observation made by the outside students was that they had never really thought about justice-involved people as something other than a criminal, a convict, or a prisoner. It was not until they started corresponding with the inside students that they began to think of them as people, as individuals and students, someone more than just the label of a convicted felon. This encounter was the first time that they thought critically about what it means to be sentenced. One student shares:

My experience with the service-learning project was very eye opening and gave me a new perspective on the way I view our prison system. I have always been more on the tough side of looking at those who are incarcerated and believing that once you commit a crime, you will always commit a crime. A1 treats these men as students not prisoners and I believe that makes a huge difference. These men have all been looked at in some way and by someone as being a criminal and not someone you want to be around, but when they are in the classroom with A1 you see nothing but happiness and excitement to learn.

Another student is quite candid and admits a lack of awareness:

The biggest realization I had was how I was unaware of the numbers and the statistics relating to those incarcerated. I have been enrolled in Criminal Justice courses since my freshman year, and this has not resonated with me until I gained a personal connection with someone who was part of the statistics.

The students mentioned how much they appreciated the work that A1 was doing. Particularly noteworthy was that A1 engaged with the inside students very much as an instructor.
engages with their students.

One common theme developed by the students was how others in society could come to know inside students as individuals just like them. The outside students noted that the mistakes and poor choices made by the inside students were probably not that different from poor decision-making that they had experienced or witnessed. One student writes:

In reflecting on the project my first thought is how unfortunate it is that so many people are institutionalized for mistakes they have made. The overall experience was very helpful and interesting to me. It added to my understanding of the criminal justice system with a viewpoint from the inside. It was very valuable to me personally as I was able to see [inside student, B] and the others I conversed with as the individual people that they are, with their own personalities, goals, and dreams for the future.

One student succinctly notes: “People on the outside need to be educated to reduce the stigma that is associated with the term felon.”

The most illuminating observation came not in face-to-face conversations or the critical reflection paper but in a letter.

I would like to add a few things for you. As I have had more time to reflect on this project, I have realized that the impact it has had on me has been far greater than I realized. The day before we went to the facility for our visit, my partner confided in me the reason that he was in prison. He gave me his full name, prison id number, and gave me permission to look him up. I did and I found several reports from his case...I cried when I read the letter, which was ten pages long.

For a brief time that evening, I had decided I was not going to go to the facility. I did not know how to face this, how to face him. As I reflected on everything I know, personally, from classes, from life, about my project partner, and about my goals for the future, I realized I had to go. Not only did I have to go, I felt it was even more important to go now, knowing what I do.

My project partner needed to know that I was sincere in my dedication to our project. I needed to be true to myself and keep my word that I would be empathetic and not pass judgment. I needed my project partner to see and know that there was truth in my words. I also needed to prove to myself that I could handle situations like this. It is a stark reality that I will have to face [in my future line of work].

This letter is a powerful statement of the types of connections being made by the outside students due to the collaboration. We included it here because it combines three main types of connections being made by the outside students: those that were personal, those that were professional (tied to their future line of work), and those that were academic (ones that improved the quality of their studies in some way).

While we don’t claim that our model guarantees a complete transformation of students’ perceptions of incarcerated individuals, it is clear that students made a transition away from deficit-based thinking about, the othering of, and distancing from such individuals (Pollack, 2014). At least in the project’s time and space, the outside students were aware of the inside students as human individuals with unique personalities and identities. Some of the inside students’ life histories were not so very different from outside students. The students built bridges over the gaps between “us” and “them.” These results were brought about, in no small part, through the Bridge Model’s correspondence-heavy, project-based format.

Challenges of the Collaboration
In speaking of the value of our experiential learning model, we would be remiss not to discuss some of the challenges we faced in its conception and implementation. The inside and outside groups differed in their approach due to the constraints on incarcerated students’ technology. The department of corrections—and the administration at the particular correctional facility—was quite supportive of the project in many ways and were exceptionally accommodating regarding our in-person meeting. However, they are particularly hard-lined about restricting the use of technology inside their facilities. For example, it was not uncommon for A1 to receive assignments completed by typewriter or hand-written on the back of a departmental request form.

The lack of technology was a recurring theme that mediated the collaboration throughout. All of the communications that came from the incarcerated group of students were physical, not digital, and had to go through A1. Since it was not convenient for him to simply drop off documents to A2’s campus mailbox, the documents were taken home, scanned, and uploaded to a shared workspace with A2’s students. Facilitating communication was a time-consuming process in itself. Each round of correspondences had a long turn-around, usually a week or more. Sometimes the inside students were able to respond in that same class period, and sometimes the communications had to wait another week. One outside student offers up the sentiment felt by most of the outside participants:

I felt as if A1 were our pony express rider and we had to wait for him to get our letters to us. With all of the instant gratification that we are used to today, with cell phones, email, and texting, our patience was tested with this slow correspondence. Our project partners mostly wrote letters with pen and paper and sent them with A1. It was sort of like traveling back in time for our partners as they have no access to cell phones, computers, email, the internet, or even dictionaries.

Finally, without using the internet to conduct project-related research, the inside students were at a considerable disadvantage compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts.

In the future, we will add more structure to the projects, particularly surrounding the students’ correspondences. While it was incredibly interesting to see people connecting on unexpected levels, we think it would be beneficial to put some limit on non-project topics of discussion, especially in later weeks. For example, exchanging recipes during week 13 didn’t appear to help students complete their projects. This is not to say that it would ever be discouraged entirely—after all, these types of conversations work to humanize the collaborators. We would also add more structure regarding the student critical reflection papers. A1 did not require a critical reflection paper for the collaboration; instead, the exercise was made optional for his students. Thus, only four of his students submitted the assignment as compared to all of A2’s participating students. We agree that all students should complete critical reflection papers in the future.

Finally, more than one meeting is needed to realize the collaborations fully. More work will be done to determine the appropriate number of in-person visits. In a perfect world, students would meet face-to-face and correspond with each other regularly. Clearly, the world we live in is not perfect. It is essential to remember that, unlike an Inside-Out class (which serves roughly 15 Inside and 15 Outside students), our model accounts for roughly 30 inside and 30 outside students (though not all participate in the collaboration, of course). We want to have more than one in-person meeting, but having fewer in-person classes overall makes logistical sense when aiming to serve such large groups of students and is thus an acceptable trade-off.

**The Road Ahead**

The face-to-face class meeting was, by all accounts, a success. Inside and outside students could talk to one another and better understand what each might be experiencing. There
was a limited opportunity for the inside and the outside students to communicate one last time to finish the semester. As I (A2) met with the outside students during the full class session and talked to them after class, I became more aware of some of the concerns and questions where people were comfortable and uncomfortable in ways that I would not have anticipated. On one level, the students felt glad that they understood what the inside students were going through. Some anticipated continuing these relationships and thought that it would be a good thing to do. At this point, I realized that I needed to be more proactive and help them think about the wisdom of continuing ongoing correspondence with the inside prisoners after the close of the semester.

We encouraged the students to think quite seriously about why they would want to continue contact with the individuals who are still not free to go about in the justice-involved community and live in prison for some time to come. I think the students, out of humanity and compassion, felt they were an essential link for the inside prisoners. We asked them to seriously think about what would happen in the coming weeks and months when their lives continued as they finished the semester and their college careers. The inside students would stay incarcerated, not out in the world, and perhaps come to rely heavily on the communication with outside students whose interests may wane over time. The last letters from a few inside students to some outside students brought a new awareness of the need to be somewhat circumspect about maintaining relationships. A couple of the exchanges were somewhat provocative. The students felt slightly uncomfortable that the inside students might be thinking about them as more than just a fellow college student. At this point, we were able to talk more openly about possibilities of manipulation and the sense of intimacy created by corresponding with someone at a distance—things that we could share and the emotions that it invokes when we know that the students are pen pals. The same feelings may not be there when we would think about encountering this person daily. We discussed difficult questions: Is this someone you would like to have just show up at your home, at your work? Would you be willing to introduce him to your friends? Setting an appropriate social distance is an area that we, the instructors, give serious consideration for future classes. Students must be more aware of the need to have a relationship for a specific purpose and for a finite time.

Just a few short months after we completed the project, the pandemic halted daily life, education, and research that we traditionally come to expect and possibly take for granted. Since the pandemic began, we are increasingly aware of how institutionalized populations have been devastated by this health crisis. While some people have been released from jails, many incarcerated people remain confined. They have seen much higher rates of transmission and infection of COVID-19 than experienced by outside society.

We have also witnessed the horrors of the killing of black citizens at the hands of police. Protests and violent demonstrations have become a regular occurrence in many cities around the U.S. and the world. It is crucial to keep in mind that the overrepresentation of people of color in correctional populations results from racial inequalities and abuses of power and violence by state agents. It is increasingly critical that we find ways, means, and processes by which we can engage with justice-involved individuals, whether they are incarcerated or living in the community. We must listen to the challenges and needs that they identify. We need to stand ready to provide critical services, technical support, and necessary compassion as required to enable and ensure that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people are heard. Our model of experiential learning is but one way of accomplishing this goal.

Coming together is one thing, but understanding each other is another. This understanding gap between the two groups simply cannot be bridged by reading a book or taking a course on the subject. And it cannot be overcome by an experiential learning opportunity that does not promote community partners’ genuine engagement. We think this point generalizes. Beyond the pairings of incarcerated and non-incarcerated people, our Bridge model of service learning can benefit other students in higher education and those in the broader community.
References


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Transaction or Transformation: Why do Philosophy in Prisons?

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Abstract: Why do public philosophy in prisons? When we think about the value and aims of public philosophy there is a well-entrenched tendency to think in transactional terms. The academy has something of value that it aims to pass on or transmit to its clients. Usually, this transaction takes place within the confines of the university, in the form of transmission of valuable skills or knowledge passed from faculty to students. Public philosophy, construed within this transactional mindset, then consists in passing on something valuable from inside the academy to the outside. In this paper, we reflect on our experiences of taking philosophy into prisons, and we argue that making the case for public philosophy in general, and philosophy in prisons in particular, in these transactional terms risks obscuring what we take to be a distinctive and valuable outcome of public philosophy. Importantly, it risks obscuring what those who participate in a particular kind of public philosophy – including the professional philosophers – experience as valuable about the activity: its transformational potential.

Keywords: philosophy in prisons, CoPI, transformative learning, dialogical philosophy, public philosophy

Introduction

Why do public philosophy in prisons? In our experience, when academics and administrators think about the value and aims of public philosophy – here used as our catchall term for any philosophical activity led by professional philosophers outside the context of a university – there is a well-entrenched tendency to think in transactional terms. This is perhaps not surprising given the tendency to think of university education in general in transactional terms. In academia, this transaction usually takes place within the confines of the university, in the form of transmission of valuable skills or knowledge passed from faculty to students. We might call this kind of intra-university philosophical activity private philosophy. Public philosophy, construed within this transactional mindset, then consists in passing on something valuable from inside the academy to the outside.

In this paper, we share our perspectives on this issue drawing on our experiences as practitioners taking philosophy into public venues such as prisons, youth centres, and schools. We will argue that a specific, widespread, and valuable alternative way of doing public philosophy should not be assimilated with this transactional methodology. We call this alternative, for reasons we explain below, transformative public philosophy. This way of doing public
philosophy we have in mind involves facilitated, semi-structured discussions that explore some philosophical question or stimulus without a specific set of answers or discursive direction in view. In this latter kind of public philosophy, there is no “sage on the stage” sharing their knowledge and wisdom in an asymmetric transaction. Rather, the practitioner stimulates and helps maintain a dialogue with the participants as they do philosophy together. It is likely that some knowledge may be transmitted during these sessions, and that the skill of ‘philosophising’ will be developed through this practice, both of which could be understood in transactional terms. However, we contend that a valuable aspect of this kind of public philosophy, namely its capacity to induce transformations of perspectives, is, importantly, not characterisable in transactional terms. This has consequences for how we view ourselves as public philosophers, for how learners view themselves as participants, and for how we view the role of public philosophy more generally.

**Transactional Public Philosophy**

Our case relies on reflections based on our experiences as practitioners, taking philosophy from the university into prisons and other community settings. These experiences have led us to draw a contrast between two ways of doing public philosophy, one which we believe to be valuable in thinking about its value and aims. One way of doing public philosophy is informed by the kind of ‘transactional’ mindset that we have just sketched and essentially consists of transposing how philosophy is taught and practiced in a university setting to some public context – we call this transactional public philosophy. Transactional public philosophy can be characterised as assuming that the role of public philosophers is to share certain goods, i.e., their knowledge and skills, with people outside of the university community for whom these will also be valuable.

Couching answers to questions about the value and aims of public philosophy in transactional terms makes them nicely comprehensible to administrators, managers, policy-makers, and funding bodies. In the case of philosophy, there are plenty of candidates for what this valuable thing might be – critical thinking skills, metacognitive abilities, or a body of knowledge and techniques for thinking about questions of moral, political, and existential importance, or some package of these items. It is tempting, then, to answer questions about the value and purpose of public philosophy by pointing to one or more of these goods. It is intuitive to many that these goods are desirable, and that engaging with philosophy might be an efficient way of transmitting them. Managers of public institutions (such as administrators of prison education programmes) are faced with the difficult task of deciding whether, how, and to what extent, they should engage with the multitude of programmes and activities that claim to have important benefits for their members. If the value of engaging in philosophy consists in the transmission of some readily quantifiable skill or body of knowledge, and if this skill or body of knowledge is deemed valuable by society, then it will be easier for philosophers to make their case to these administrators for bringing philosophy into their institution.

Transactional thinking also makes it easier to demonstrate whether what we are doing is working. We simply need to decide what quantifiable good we aim to transmit, find a way to measure it, and gather the results – perhaps a metacognition test, a quiz about whatever body of knowledge has been deemed valuable, or a questionnaire about whether participants feel their critical thinking abilities have improved. For the same reasons, a transactional mindset makes it easier for philosophers to justify what they are doing – in the language of university mission statements, impact agendas, and government targets – to their own institutions when they make their case for financial and institutional support.

We recognise that this kind of transactional thinking has its necessary place and that it is often expedient or unavoidable to make the case for public philosophy in these terms (see e.g. Pritchard, 2019; Szifris, 2017). In our experience, the administrators who have made it possible for us to run philosophy projects in prison have been incredibly positive and supportive about
the value of doing philosophy. Nevertheless, just as is the case when arranging projects to take philosophy into schools, there is always a feeling that the projects need to have some kind of reportable outcome. Indeed, we acknowledge that it would often be irresponsible for education administrators, funding bodies, and policymakers not to require a case from philosophers couched at least partly in these terms. They are quite right to demand more than hand-waving and good vibes. Moreover, we agree that the goods listed above are valuable, and are optimistic that engaging with philosophy in certain ways does indeed promote them (though there are reasons, explored well by others to be cautious about claiming too much here – see e.g. Huber & Kuncel, 2016). However, our experiences lead us to think that making the case for public philosophy in general, and philosophy in prisons in particular, in these transactional terms, risks obscuring what we take to be a distinctive and valuable outcome of public philosophy. And, importantly, it risks obscuring what those who participate in a particular kind of public philosophy – including the professional philosophers – experience as valuable about the activity. To the extent that this is true, there will always be an element of inauthenticity and self-deceit in any rationalisation of the value of this kind of public philosophy in purely transactional terms, and an imperfect fit between how the nature and purpose of philosophical activity are described and the participants’ actual experience of the activity and its results.

**Dialogical Public Philosophy**

There is an alternative way of doing public philosophy that does not necessarily presume that philosophers are engaged in a knowledge transaction with the public. This way of doing philosophy will be familiar to those who have encountered the various philosophy for/with children (P4C) techniques that are currently very popular. For example, those developed and promoted by The Philosophy Foundation, Philosophy Circles, or SAPERE. On these kinds of approaches, the discussions are facilitated by someone who is responsible for guiding the discourse in philosophically interesting and productive directions and who draws out contributions from participants which illuminate the range of issues and contrasting positions that emerge from the discussion. Discussions are semi-structured insofar as there is some organization imposed on the activity by the facilitator that is designed to accentuate philosophically important aspects of the participants’ activities, or to otherwise structure their thinking in productive ways. This imposed organization can take a non-exclusive range of forms, from minimal to maximal. Minimally, it might consist in using guiding questions at relevant points to prompt the participants to explain the reasons behind the claims that they make, or in chunking the activity into different subsections, each aiming to foster or develop specific sorts of interactions among the participants. Less minimally, it might require that participants’ contributions to the discussion fit some specific schema, examples of which themselves can be more or less prescriptive. While a minimal schema might require only that participants offer reasons for the positions they express or relate them to the contributions of other participants, more prescriptive schemas might specify particular ways in which this should be done, such as: ‘I agree/disagree with [participant] when they said [reconstruction of participant’s claim] because [reason for agreement/disagreement] – as employed in some ways of CoPI (community of philosophical inquiry) style facilitating. Alternatively, the organization might be imposed only by the way the facilitator directs the discussion – the way in which they foreground some aspects of the participants’ contributions, or the dynamics of their interactions over others, by calling on different contributors, asking for clarifications, or otherwise fostering specific interactions among participants and discursive directions over others.

Perhaps most importantly, though, on this way of doing philosophy, there should be no fixed discursive ends in view for the facilitator as they go into the activity or participate in it. This contrasts with philosophy as practiced within the university (or indeed in public lectures) where the teacher gives clear direction towards what are standardly considered to be the philosophically “interesting” questions, has the explicit intention to convey a particular set of historical and contemporary responses to those questions, and conveys the expectation that
listeners critically engage with the question on the basis of those historical and contemporary responses. Of course, if the public philosophy facilitator is a trained philosopher, they may well have their own stance on the theme or topic under discussion, likely including their own sense of the aspects of the theme it might be most beneficial or interesting for the group to pursue. But, on this model of facilitating enquiry, this stance should not inform the way they facilitate the discussion. The direction and focus of the discussion should develop organically from the way the participants engage with the activity, rather than being bent by the facilitator to fit a preconceived mould or to hit pre-specified talking points. This is, in our experience, the most challenging aspect of facilitation for many philosophers – we will have more to say about the nature of this challenge and the importance of meeting it below.

This generic way of doing public philosophy and its broadly Deweyan roots will be familiar to many. It is often referred to under the generic term “P4C” (i.e., “philosophy for children”) because it is the form most often used when practitioners take philosophy into schools. But it is not a childish way of doing philosophy, and so is certainly not just philosophy “for children”. These methods are suitable for doing philosophy with children because they do not require a particular educational background or a pre-conceived interest in “philosophical issues”. They do not require the participants to be able to do prior reading (or indeed any preparation) nor do they require the participants to learn complex terminology or be able to regurgitate what other people have said on the topic. While the training in these techniques often does involve games to keep participants alert and interested (and to build a sense of community) these are not essential to the methods themselves. Just as the same core methods of promoting philosophical dialogue can be used with both 5-year-olds and 18-year-olds in schools with only slight adaptations to the running of the sessions, they can also be used with adults aged 18+. It is what the participants bring to the sessions in terms of their concepts and reasoning that shapes the “maturity” of the dialogue.

We will therefore refer to any way of doing public philosophy that is facilitated, semi-structured, and has no discursive ends in view as a dialogical model. We have already mentioned perhaps the best-known and most influential instance of such a model – Lipman’s Dewey-inspired CoPI methodology – above (see Kennedy, 2012 for discussion of Lipman’s programme and its relationship to Dewey’s philosophy). In what follows, we focus exclusively on the CoPI-style approach we have just outlined. Why focus on this way of doing things? One reason is that this is the general form that public philosophy in schools and prisons often takes – and, as we will subsequently suggest, it is particularly easy to see why this mode of public philosophy is better construed as transformative than transactional.

**Philosophy in the University vs. Philosophy in the Prison**

Why not teach philosophy in prisons in the same way that we teach philosophy in the university? Our experiences as both university teachers and facilitators of philosophy dialogue in prisons and youth settings have given us the opportunity to see philosophy done in both settings in transactive and dialogical ways. Moreover, we believe that there is a place for both ways of “doing” philosophy in these settings. For example, there are a number of learners in the prison setting who are keen to take national qualifications in academic subjects and who undertake Open University degrees. These learners are understandably interested in a form of transaction of knowledge about philosophy as well as engaging in doing philosophy. Similarly, even though in a standard university degree course there is an expectation of knowledge transaction, dialogical approaches can also be introduced within tutorials and seminars to encourage

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1 We do not mean to claim that this dialogical way of engaging in philosophical enquiry is the only one that is not happily assimilated into a transactional mindset, or the only one better captured by the ‘transformative’ alternative we here propose.

2 Various approaches with potentially important methodological divergences conform to these generic conditions, but we don’t aim to distinguish or adjudicate between these here. See e.g. Williams (2016) for a partial, UK-centric survey.
participation and learning to “philosophise”. Nevertheless, our experience has led us to believe that there are important differences between the two settings which are worth cashing out.

Doing philosophy in a university is what most professional philosophers are mostly paid to do. They have invested time learning about some particular canon of texts and ideas (or several) and learning a specific set of methodological and discursive skills for engaging with them and contributing to current scholarship. The students who they teach have (hopefully) knowingly and voluntarily invested time and financial resources to have some of this knowledge and some of these skills transmitted to or inculcated in them. And the success or failure of the academic’s interactions with their students is measured in part according to quantifiable scores according to metrics that have been settled in advance – such as achievement of pre-specified learning outcomes, student performance with respect to a grading rubric, and instructor performance with respect to student evaluation metrics. These institutional features of professional philosophy can make the transactional mindset so pervasive as to be invisible. If all your philosophical interactions are with students and colleagues who have already bought into the value of philosophical knowledge and skills, it is easy to forget about the question of how or why such knowledge and skill might come to seem valuable in the first place (or might fail to do so). And, if the assessment of your professional performance and value tends to be couched exclusively in terms of the kinds of metrics we just mentioned, it becomes easier to overlook the possibility that these metrics obscure other ways of articulating the purpose and value of philosophical activity.

These institutional features and the mindset they encourage can make a particular way of doing and thinking about public philosophy seem natural or unavoidable – simply take what one does in a philosophy classroom and transpose it to a public setting. Some modifications might be necessary, such as tinkering with content and delivery in ways tailored to the likely skillset and interests of your audience (strip out some jargon, make things a bit chattier, focus preferentially on aspects you think will resonate with your audience) but the essential structure and aim of the activity remain the same. When justifying the value of what one is doing, simply pick one or more items from the laundry-list of institutionally sanctioned benefits of academic philosophy (desirability to employers; general-purpose reasoning skills; understanding of civically important issues, etc.) most likely to appeal to your audience or whoever is granting you access to them. When assessing the efficacy of what you have done, pick the appropriate institutionally legible metric and apply it (perhaps: administer general-purpose reasoning quizzes before and after the activities; track subsequent employment or access to further education; or simply look for indicators of approval and tell-tale buzzwords in post-participation questionnaires).

This way of doing public philosophy understands the nature, value, and aims of public philosophy in terms of a kind of ‘transactional’ ideology fostered by aspects of professionalised academic philosophy. Public philosophy here simply consists in transposing some of the kinds of transactions and modes of evaluation that occur within universities to a public setting. This is what we call transactional public philosophy. As we intimated above, we do not wish to disparage colleagues who practice public philosophy in something like this transactional way, nor to reject the claims that any of the particular quantifiable goods we’ve mentioned above are valuable or that engaging in philosophy is a way of acquiring them. But, as we also noted, we do not think that this is the only way of doing or thinking about public philosophy. An important reason for this is that many of the institutional features that make transactional thinking (and the corresponding ways of doing philosophy) distinctively appropriate within a university are simply not found in most public institutions and contexts.

While we think this point has broad application (a case we hope to develop elsewhere) we restrict our reflections here to philosophical activity within prison education based on our experiences in these projects. Some of the institutional features common to universities (at least in the UK) rest on a presumption of homogeneity in respect to the students’ educational
preparation and ambitions. Although many different kinds of people study at universities, a university’s student population is homogeneous at least insofar as it is reasonable to expect that each student has a broadly positive experiential history with the metrics and incentive systems of institutional education and a broadly positive valuation of the outcomes that it claims to promote. We should not expect the same kind of homogeneity within a prison population. Our own discussions with prison learners and prison educators and administrators suggest that many of the people within the current UK prison context have had a rather negative experience of institutional education. A university population is also reasonably homogeneous with respect to its level of past educational attainment. In the projects we have been involved in, participation has been voluntary, and therefore the participants have for the most part been a self-selecting group. They have comprised learners with university degrees (or studying towards Open University degrees) as well as learners with few or no qualifications and poor literacy skills but who have curiosity and a hunger for mental stimulation. Often these learners will have already indicated some interest in the educational offerings of the prison, but we also get those with no previous experience in the learning centre who have been persuaded by their peers or by prison staff to come along and try it out. Therefore, in our sessions, a wide range of experiences with and attitudes towards the value of institutional education will be present. Finally, a university population is also reasonably homogeneous with respect to the skills and dispositions required to engage with the institutional structures of higher education. Again, there is no reasonable expectation of such homogeneity in a group of prison learners. The fact that professional academics are a self-selecting group whose lives have been pervasively and positively shaped by institutionalised education, and who spend most of their time in and around that institutional context, can make this disanalogy easy to miss. It is easy for a career academic to forget, for example, that the capacity to sit attentively while a stranger talks at length, only partially to you, about some specialised interest of theirs is a strange one that must be cultivated, and that many people have no occasion to cultivate.

The Dialogical Model in the Prison

These differences between university and prison populations raise the question of whether a transactional model is the best way of understanding what public philosophy in prisons should aim to achieve and how it should be done. As we have noted, there are many cases where a straightforward transposition or adaptation of university teaching methods and content is appropriate, as in cases in which the prison learners have indicated that they want to engage in university-style education and work towards school or university qualifications. While there is an important place for offering philosophy as an academic subject to prison learners who want it, this would be the remit of the colleges running the educational programmes within the prison rather than the role of university academics engaging in public philosophy. And, in our experience, only some of the participants of our philosophy sessions have indicated an interest in taking this orthodox academic route into philosophy. The particular kind of model we favour for doing public philosophy – a dialogical model that consists in programmes of facilitated semi-structured philosophical discussion – helps to address the challenges posed by working with groups with diverse attitudes to the structures, values, and norms of institutionalised education, and diverse academic skills and dispositions.

In our experience, one advantage of the dialogical model that makes it particularly suitable for use in the prison context is that, unlike transactional models, it does not have a hierarchical power structure baked into it, wherein the success or failure of participation is ultimately measured in terms of the extent to which participants have listened to and absorbed what the educator has to teach them. Instead, the discussions that result have a cooperative and communal structure, as the group progresses together towards an understanding of the conflicts or complementarity between their evolving perspectives on the topics discussed. The fact that the facilitated discussions have no pre-specified learning outcomes or success conditions – beyond producing and discussing ideas of philosophical interest – means that the contributions of
participants are not being evaluated according to some independent metric which they might or might not buy into. And, importantly, a good facilitator functions as an active participant in the dialogue – not (usually) by explicitly offering their opinions on the topic at hand or the merits of the participants’ contributions, but by participating in and channelling the dynamics of the interactions between participants and their viewpoint, sharing in their perplexity, surprise, or excitement, and using their own experience of this participation to help the interactions of the participants flow down whatever philosophically interesting paths are opened up by the discussion. Instead of explicitly aiming to transmit skills or content to the participants, then, the facilitator attempts to clarify and help participants navigate the intellectual landscape that organically arises from their contributions and interactions. As a participant themselves, the facilitator is not a dispassionate observer of this landscape, but a fellow traveller.

In addition to the flattening of the hierarchical power structure that is implicit in most institutionalised teaching, this dialogical mode of philosophical interaction requires less in the way of the idiosyncratic set of dispositions that are presupposed or cultivated by institutionalised education. We mentioned above the disposition to attend carefully and at length to a monologue delivered by a stranger on an unfamiliar and complex topic. Whilst the practice of transposing a lecture or undergraduate society talk to a prison context implicitly relies on the (implausible) assumption that most participants will share this disposition, the dialogical model we are considering builds on more generic and widely shared social dispositions and capacities, such as engaging with the opinions and points of view of one’s discussion partners, tracking a discussion’s ebb, flow, and overall structure, and attuning oneself to the changing mood of the group. Of course, there will be variation in the distribution of these dispositions and capacities within any given group – but they are undoubtedly more widespread than the specialised set of dispositions implicitly presupposed by the structure of university education. And, as the feedback from the prison learners who participated in one of the University of Edinburgh philosophy in prisons projects shows, the development of these skills transfers to life contexts that the learners themselves value (see Bovill & Anderson 2020; Pritchard 2019; Pritchard [this issue]; Stapleton 2020).

The dialogical model we favour does not presuppose either a positive evaluation of the power structure or incentive systems of institutional education, or that participants possess the idiosyncratic set of dispositions and capacities presupposed by standard methods of university teaching. It is, in this sense, more widely accessible than transactional models that simply transpose aspects of institutional education into a public setting such as public “knowledge exchange” lectures. This accessibility also gives the dialogical model the important benefit of opening up positive experiences of education systems to a wider range of participants. While the kind of dialogical philosophy we advocate here has no prespecified learning outcomes or topic-specific success conditions, participants will still differ in the extent to which their contributions shape the direction of the conversation and resonate with the mood or interest of the group. One intriguing feature of the kinds of philosophical discussions we favour that has consistently emerged in our practice is that it is often difficult to predict in advance who will engage most thoughtfully and productively. When conducted in institutionalised educational contexts, these dialogues often upend usual classroom hierarchies. After most of the discussions we have facilitated with school classes, for example, teachers have expressed surprise at which of their students have contributed the most insightful and provocative ideas. And we, in turn, were initially surprised to learn that what we perceived to be some of the most philosophically valuable and productive contributions to the discussions often came from pupils who were usually disruptive or disengaged. This same dynamic was evident in our practice in the prison context, with valuable and articulate contributions coming from participants who did not consider themselves to be “academic” and who would surprise the education centre staff with the depth of their thinking when they observed sessions. As a result of witnessing this again and again in different projects, we are convinced that dialogical philosophy can often give positive
experiences of shaping the thoughts of one’s peers and the dynamics of a classroom to new sets of students, and these experiences can, in turn, be valuable nudges towards more positive attitudes to education in general.

**Philosophical Dialogue, Perspectives, and Transformation**

So far, we have given some instrumental reasons in favour of a particular dialogical approach to public philosophy, and philosophy in prisons in particular. This dialogical method has fewer barriers to full participation, opening up positive experiences of philosophical activity to a wider range of participants than a straightforward transposition of institutional teaching to public contexts. We have not explained, however, why we deny that this dialogical mode of philosophical activity can be fully assimilated by a transactional ideology. That is, why the benefits of facilitated philosophical dialogue cannot be fully captured in terms of the transmission of valuable knowledge, skills, and dispositions. To see why this is so, we first explain, drawing on previous work by one of us (Stapleton, 2020) the sense in which we think the kind of philosophical dialogue sketched above can be ‘transformative’ for its participants.

The term “transformative” is commonplace in education studies, but we use it to refer back to the line of research initiated by Jack Mezirow and colleagues in the field of adult education. In the 1970s there was a surge of adult women returning to college and university having previously left formal education to become wives and mothers. Mezirow noticed that this population of students not only learnt new content and skills but for many the process seemed to also awaken new perspectives, both on the world and themselves and their place in the world. Mezirow’s key insight was that there is a difference between developing new perspectives as a result of learning new things – what we might think of as broadening our perspectives – and the development of new perspectives as a result of revealing and potentially undermining the habits of mind through which our perspectives are structured. When we become aware that our perspectives are structured through these habits of mind, and that these habits of mind are contingent (they are not necessarily shared by others, and we might not have had them ourselves if we had a different temperament, upbringing, or life experience) this shakes that perspective enough that we are less entrenched in it. While we might still take that perspective, we come to recognise it as a perspective and recognise that we could have another one. Under the right conditions, this opens the space for moving towards another perspective that better attunes the person to the world as they can make sense of it now (see Stapleton, 2020). This is transformational learning.

Based on our experiences as facilitators of philosophical dialogue, we think that the dialogical philosophy described above is particularly good at bringing about this kind of perspective-unsticking. This might seem to be a similar kind of process to that which people undergo when they are in therapy when for example, they are guided to uncover their “core beliefs” and consider whether they are justified or helpful. It also might seem similar to the kind of directed meta-cognition exercises that we do in the school or university classroom when we encourage students to consider the hidden assumptions behind arguments (including their own) and whether these assumptions are warranted. But there are key differences between dialogical philosophy and these other ways of bringing habits of mind to awareness. While they each might aim to unstick us from unwarranted or unhelpful beliefs, dialogical philosophy does not rely on an asymmetric power relationship whereby the practitioner (be they teacher or therapist) “knows better” than the student/client about human psychology or critical thinking, and therefore, already has in mind that the student or client has hidden assumptions/core beliefs, what those might be, and instructs them to identify and express them. In dialogical philosophy, the practitioner is a participant themselves in this process via their facilitation, with their perspectives as open to being shaken and “unstuck” as much as any of the students in the group. Moreover, dialogical philosophy does not require that participants are able to access these core beliefs, hidden assumptions, or habits of mind themselves. Participants do not need to deliber-
ately or explicitly focus on their own beliefs or perspectives. The dynamics of the discussion separates out the ideas expressed, and the assumptions behind those ideas, from the people who raise them. This allows participants to be free of the feeling that they need to defend their opinion or stick by what they have said previously, even so much that they can play at being the devil’s advocate.

It is this space of dialogical enquiry and the dynamics that emerge from genuine shared engagement with the ideas that participants raise, that provides the conditions for participants to become aware of the contingency of perspectives. Importantly, this is done without being forced to reflect on the contingency of their own perspective. While reflecting on the contingency of one’s own perspectives might seem to be the most efficient route to unsticking people from their entrenched perspectives, there are reasons to think that this direct route might not always be the best approach. We think this is true for participants in general, but especially salient for participants within the prison context. It is not uncommon in any domain for the direct questioning of someone’s assumptions (especially when these assumptions are core beliefs/habits of mind) to lead to a defensive rigidifying of their perspective in order to protect their sense of dignity and self-respect. In a context in which the participants may feel insecure about their academic background as compared to the facilitator’s, may worry about potential loss of status within their peer group, or who may come to the project suspicious of the motives of the programme, this may present even more of a risk. Moreover, when working with participants who are in a psychologically vulnerable situation – as many of those in prison are (even merely in virtue of being imprisoned which can be a traumatic experience in and of itself) – we need to be aware that directly and purposefully shaking the foundations of the participants’ psychological structures could trigger a traumatic collapse of their mental security.

In our experience, dialogical philosophy provides a safe space in which perspectives can be unstuck indirectly. We see this at first by an increase in the tendency of participants to play devil’s advocate over the course of the programme; the increased willingness to say something that they do not believe to see where that will lead the dialogue. At the same time, we have observed an increased tendency among participants to disagree with what they themselves have said previously. When using the CoPI method outlined above this is done by explicitly saying “I disagree with myself when I said that...”. This can provoke good humour and laughter in the participants and brings in a ‘lightness’ to the discussion that seems to help other participants to become less committed to staunchly defending what they themselves had expressed earlier.

By providing a structured forum for discussion that allows participants to engage with each other and try out ideas and arguments without having to be personally invested in them, and to see how they and others think and talk about their and others’ ideas, what lies behind them, and what follows from them, dialogical philosophy provides an indirect means to unsticking people from their perspectives. When participants are able to see the contingency of other people’s perspectives, this opens up the space for them to see other possibilities than they saw before. This may – in and of itself – be enough to start the work of unsticking their own perspectives without deliberately or explicitly engaging in self-directed critical scrutiny of their past or present assertions and beliefs.

**Dialogical Philosophy: Transformation or Transaction?**

It is this “perspective unsticking” feature of facilitated philosophical dialogue that we aim to draw attention towards when we label it a kind of ‘transformative’ public philosophy. But, as noted at the outset, our main claim here is that the nature and value of this dialogical kind of philosophical activity cannot be fully articulated within the kind of ‘transactional’ mindset we sketched above. Thus far, you might wonder why not – we have spoken about the valuable experiences of philosophical activity (and education more broadly) that dialogical philosophy can bring about, and valuable skills and capacities to flexibly shift between perspectives in thinking that we believe it helps foster. If these were the only salient virtues of
dialogical philosophy, it could indeed be assimilated into a transactional mindset – dialogical public philosophy could be understood merely as a transaction in which these valuable experiences, skills, and capacities are sold or donated by the university to a public institution. But this picture, we think, obscures what ultimately allows dialogical philosophy to be experienced as valuable by its participants. Our case for this claim about the experienced value of dialogical philosophy is, in large part, phenomenological – drawn from our own experiences of these dialogues, and our sharing in the experiences of our dialogue partners, as well as discussions with the learners after the sessions.

We propose that the key features that prevent dialogical philosophy from being fully assimilated into a transactional mindset are the distinctive experience of having one’s perspective transformed or unstuck and the way in which this experience is brought about by genuine participation in the affective and inferential dynamics of the conversation. The playful way that dialogical philosophy is structured and run, with the facilitator being a genuine participant (even if one who tries to interject only minimally in order to make space for the other participants to be engaged) provides a way to disagree with others and oneself without needing to be defensive. When this defensiveness is lost, having one’s perspective – one’s particular way of thinking about some issue or topic – unstuck, upended, or transformed, can be pleasurable and moreish. It can be experienced as having a value that is independent of the truth or utility of the way it opens up or closes off particular thoughts, and of the way in which it exemplifies and strengthens particular habits and dispositions of thinking and interacting. Of course, not everyone experiences this kind of perspective transformation as intrinsically pleasant or valuable – but, we submit, most of those who are drawn to philosophy do. Our experience observing the increased levity and joy that are expressed by the participants during the sessions as the programmes progress, as well as the persistent enthusiasm for more sessions to be run after each session finishes, convinces us that the experience of doing dialogic philosophy leads participants in the prison sessions to also experience these perspective transformations as intrinsically valuable.

The experience of having one’s intellectual bearings shifted and reset, and the resulting intellectual disorientation and reorientation, is an essential aspect of philosophy – part of what is alluded to in well-known epigrams like ‘philosophy begins in wonder’ (Plato), or that ‘the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it’ (Russell). One striking feature of engaging in dialogical philosophy is how quickly and easily such experiences come, even (perhaps especially) for the professional philosopher facilitating. Dialogical philosophy often involves thinking outside of the familiar matrices of positions, terms, arguments, and counterarguments within which professional philosophers spend their time (indeed, one of the challenges of facilitation is to resist the impulse to squash the contributions of participants into some familiar matrix or steer the discussion back towards one). This is part of what makes the experience of participating in the dialogue exhilarating for the facilitator. What university-based philosopher, for example, would have seriously considered the idea that a forged work of art by a renowned forger might be considered more valuable than the original? Yet, this was almost unanimously the case in one of the sessions we participated in. In that group, respect for the skill and ingenuity of the forger outweighed more orthodox attributions of value related to provenance and prompted the facilitators to reconsider their own positions.

Speaking for ourselves, these experiences of exhilarating disorientation, reorientation, and transformation are important reasons why we are drawn to do philosophy in non-university contexts. They remind us of the fundamental place of these experiences in philosophical activity, something that can often be obscured by the amount of time professional philosophers must devote to teaching, writing, and thinking within pre-specified intellectual and argumentative frameworks. This, we think, is why facilitators frequently report that their experiences of the dialogues transform their own teaching practice, and often their own thinking. Speaking
for ourselves again, participating in these dialogues has certainly reshaped our teaching practice in several ways. It underscored to us, for example, the importance of letting our students’ engagements with the material we are working with shape the way that we teach it, rather than focusing from the outset on nudging students into sharing our own preferred theoretical concerns and priorities.

We thus submit that the experienced value of perspective transformation is, for many, a main impetus for participating in dialogical philosophy. Just as is the case for practitioners, many of the participants also experience these perspective transformations as valuable. In our experience, prison staff have regularly expressed surprise at the high rate of participation in the projects as they are going on and have noted how much the participants say they enjoy the sessions and how some of these participants subsequently engage differently in other classes. Participants also regularly request for projects to continue or to be allowed to participate again in the next project. Some of the responses to interview questions conducted with participants and prison educators after the pilot of the Edinburgh University project in 2014-15 also strongly suggest that participants found value in their perspective changes (see Bovill & Anderson, 2020; Pritchard, 2019; this issue Stapleton, 2020).

Because these experiences of perspective-change are brought about by shared participation in the dialogue, and because the facilitator is as likely as other participants to have their perspective disrupted, unstuck, or transformed, this ensures that the interaction between the academic and the prison learners here cannot be understood in purely transactional terms. The academic facilitator does not have some experience, knowledge, or skill that they aim to transmit to the participants – rather, they are cooperatively engaging in bringing about a shared process of interaction via which the perspectives of any or all participants might be transformed in ways that cannot be articulated or predicted by the facilitator in advance.

The genuinely egalitarian and open-ended character of dialogical philosophy is thus what makes it transformative rather than transactional, in the senses we have articulated here. As far as the experienced value of perspective-transformation is concerned, all participants in the dialogue stand to gain equally from the activity, and no one participant has a privileged understanding of exactly how things will unfold. This in turn makes clear why this kind of dialogical philosophical activity is not an impure, watered-down, or patronising version of the professionalised kinds of activity we find in a university context. The experienced perspective transformations that participants might undergo in public and private contexts might differ in terms of the particular thoughts and topics involved, but they are experiences of the same qualitative kind. And, in particular, the perceptible manifestations of these experiences on the part of the facilitator – the way in which they are visibly absorbed, disoriented, or excited by the shared discursive process in which they are participating – are not faked or watered-down versions of reactions that occur more fully or authentically in a university context.

**Conclusion**

We have argued here that one popular form that public philosophy can take – the kind of facilitated, semi-structured, and open-ended conversations that we here labelled ‘dialogical philosophy’ cannot be adequately understood merely in terms of a transaction of knowledge or skills from an academic to the public. This is because a main source of the experienced value of dialogical philosophy for its participants is the positive experience of having one’s perspectives and habits of thoughts disrupted, unstuck, or transformed. But these valuable experiences (and the capacities for flexible and creative thinking that they involve and help to develop) are not goods that a professional philosopher is in a position to sell or donate to the participants, as a transactional model would have it. Rather, these experiences and perspectival transformations emerge from the shared activity of the group in ways that cannot be reliably predicted in advance or fully controlled by the professional philosopher. With respect to their knowledge of the direction the activity should or will take, or their chances of having their perspective pro-
ductively disrupted or transformed by the activity, the facilitating philosopher is in no better or worse position than any other participant.

We think that this resistance of dialogical philosophy to transactional models is important for several reasons. To the extent that it is true that the experienced value of engaging in this kind of philosophy stems from positive experiences of communally engendered perspective-shifting, rationalisations or justifications of dialogical philosophy in transactional terms will always be partial and incomplete at best, self-deceiving and inauthentic at worst. We also think that seeing this aspect of dialogical philosophy is necessary for a clearer view of its strengths and limitations. Dialogical philosophy is usually, we submit, experienced as valuable to the extent that participants are receptive to perspective shifts or transformations brought about by open-ended discussion of philosophical issues. Needless to say, this is not for everyone. For those less keen on such open-ended discussion, who would nonetheless value or benefit from having their perspectives on the world flexed or challenged, other avenues – art, drama, learning new physical skills – might be better suited. Above, we also mentioned several instrumental benefits of dialogical philosophy that are closely entwined with its non-transactional character and which might make it particularly refreshing, and therefore appealing to learners in the prison context–its lack of reliance on the standard hierarchies and incentives of institutionalised education, its comparative lack of barriers to full participation, and the ways in which it thus opens up positive experiences of education to a broad range of potential participants. Perhaps most importantly, though, seeing the anti-transactional character of dialogical philosophy gives us a clearer and better picture of the relationship between universities and public institutions that public philosophy can involve. The public philosopher here does not adopt the posture of a sage or saint who temporarily steps out of their ivory tower to share their knowledge and skills with the lucky public. Instead, they are an active and equal participant in a shared activity, from which they stand to gain as much as the learner in prison.

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